

“The True Self Always Desires to Persevere in Love”

(Fifth sermon in a six week series on “The True and False Self”)

Psalm 136: 1-9

I Corinthians 13: 1-7 (Focus on Verses 7)

Rev. Ed Hoekstra

As we begin to look at verse 7 of I Corinthians 13, what stands out is how difficult it is to love. In the first sermon of this series, we talked about how one can do amazing things with their God-given gifts, but if there is no love in it - it all amounts to nothing. We learned that we are not merely random beings, but rather intentionally created by God in God’s own image to do good works as God has created us to do.

We are all meant to come to be followers of Christ, not merely people who believe with their heads but also follow the way of Christ in their day to day activities. As a congregation we have within our mission statement these words, “inspiring passionate followers of Jesus Christ”! In other words, we are not here just to provide a service to meet needs. Group meetings and fellowship are important benefits of belonging to a church, and these things are wonderful, but our mission is not meant to stop there!

In being part of a Christian church one is to expect encouragement and direction to engage in Spiritual Formation to become more like Christ. The closer we come to that likeness, through regular prayer and meditation on the scriptures, we open ourselves up to the love of God which gives us hope and releases joy because we are growing to experience the love of God firsthand! This is good news which we want to share with our family and friends!

When I was a teenager, I was known to run out of gas. The majority of us have done this at some point in our lives. If not personally, you may have been a passenger with someone who ran out of gas. The well-used 67 Mercury (Ford) pickup truck I bought when I was 17 was (in my view) a good purchase.

Small things would go wrong from time to time, including the gas gauge not working. I thought that was fine. I could get around that by counting my mileage to measure when it would be time to fill up with gas. The problem was that I did not check my mileage on a regular basis and I would find myself on the side of the road stopped. We all know that we need to pay attention to the gas gauge otherwise we will be in trouble! How is your fuel gauge in terms of your spiritual life?

It is not easy to put on the love of Christ with our neighbour! It is important to have our gas tank filled with the love of God so we can share it. We love the concept of loving God and loving

others but get distracted by the messages of this world and we run on empty because we tend to build an intimate relationship with the world and not with God.

Paul is in effect saying to us to learn about what love is, but don't just believe it - follow Christ and practise it! Then we are living closer to our true selves as God created us to be. The church in Corinth was running out of gas. They were hearing the word and liking what they heard, but not following. We as Christians today are to be attentive to Christ through worship, prayer and meditation on scripture and be filled up by the Spirit. Then you can move forward more freely by sharing the Good News of God's love as a natural habit coming out of your true selves connected to resource of God's love in Christ.

As our denomination interviews candidates for the ministry, a common question asked of students, after they have completed all their studies and are almost ready to be ordained, is this: What in your view is the greatest challenge facing the church today? Yes, the Coronavirus pandemic is certainly an emergent challenge which all churches need to be very serious about now. But the question is bigger in terms of asking the student which things get in the way of Christ's vision for the church to advance the Kingdom of God – the Kingdom of Love in the world.

The answer given by the most recent student we interviewed was that the church has been weak in making Disciples of Christ. In other words, the church has provided a community and teaching about God and his revelation through Jesus Christ, but weak on making followers (Disciples) of Christ who strive to be formed in the way of Christ in their day to day living (in their true selves).

Disciples of Christ desire to have their actions more in line with the actions of Jesus. To follow Christ is not the easy road, but the one where we can be free to be our true selves – not motivate by fear, but inspired by Love. Christ's pursuit of love and his opposition to evil led to his death on the cross, but it changed the world. Christ won the victory and that is inspiring!

As we come up to verse seven, we notice that Paul's message on love has shifted from talking about the characteristics of Agape love to explaining the fullness of this love. In I Corinthians 13: 7, the words 'all things' state that this love, this agape love is the highest form of love and is a comprehensive and complete love.

Paul states 'love bears all things'. The word 'bear' comes from the Greek word 'stego' which means to cover as a roof, to protect, to shield from the elements, hot temperature, etc. This protection is vital in all climates. First, we must understand there are different seasons in life which are not all pleasurable.

Some seasons in life are stormy and very difficult. There are external influences which can hurt us and we need protection. If we do not have a guard in those stormy times, it is difficult for us to survive spiritually. The Love of Christ within protects us from the storms without.

Paul wants the church in Corinth to know that this agape love serves as a protection for them. In comparison to a roof on a house, a friend will stay near in times of trouble. That friend will be there to protect you in the storms of life. Shield you from exposure. Real agape love is present in times of trouble to offer support. Christ offers that agape love to us continually and as followers of Christ, we are to provide that protective love to others.

When Paul writes in the next part of verse 7 that 'love believes all things', the word believe comes from the Greek word "pisteuei" which means to put your faith or trust in something or someone. The way the tense is used here suggests this is a constant, continuous entrusting faith involving a 'never give up' kind of faith that believes the best in every situation.

Not to be misunderstood as a blind agape love. NO, it sees everything – the good and the bad. Since this agape love is filled with Christ, it sees and pushes those negative things aside and the problems are not being ignored. Rather, a choice is made to see beyond the problems and the conflicts and to seek the highest potential that is in each person.

Perhaps you are having trouble with your children. Today is a new day and you simply cannot throw in the towel and give up. You believe with agape love in Christ that things can turn around. Love in Christ means that though the past may have been a troubling time, the future is bright for those who believe God.

In Agape love one pushes forward with faith seeing the other person as whole person made in the image of God, loved by God and created for God's purposes. That individual may make choices out of line with Agape love, but that does not mean you give up on Agape love. Agape love is the best defense against evil. It is stronger than evil. The agape love of God does not quit when things get tough. This love continues to believe in the other.

Do you pick people apart with their flaws and weaknesses? Do you see other's potential through the perspective of love, or do you look at them with the eyes of criticism. This love that believes all things believes the best --that you and the other have potential to be healed and redeemed.

In terms of the phrase, 'love hopes all things', we first want to look at the Greek word for hope which is 'elpidzo'. This is key because hope is defined here as 'the expectation' of good things. Agape love brings hope of the expectation of God's promises and therefore joy in the present. Anxiety is similar to hope in the one sense that both anxiety and hope look at the future. Anxiety looks at the future with fear, but hope looks at the future with joy. Hope is thankful for the past but looks forwards to the future with God.

In the final part of verse 7 says, 'love endures all things'. The Greek word for endure is 'hupomeno'. Where the first part of the word is 'hupo' which translated means 'under' and the second part 'meno' means to 'stay or abide with'.

This compound word depicts the stance of a person who is under a heavy load in life (so to speak) but refuses to surrender defeat from their situation. The person is committed to love and regardless of the increased challenges he/she will not be moved. Agape love does not know how to quit. Agape love is committed to the promises made.

This kind of love is completely contrary to the false self. The false self will refer back to the self and say, "this is not working for me. I am out of here. I am not going to waste anymore of my life." It is so important to remember that Agape love does not mean that one condones an abusive situation. Agape love certainly does not say that an individual must remain with the person who is abusing - No! On the contrary, this agape love in Christ gives discernment, confidence, courage and strength for an individual to leave an abusive relationship when necessary.

When you look in the mirror of God's Word and look closely at the characteristics of agape love in verse 7, could you say that this kind of love is operating in your life? Would others who know you say that you have been like a "roof" for them — where you have offered protection for them during the hard and difficult seasons of life? Would others notice that you believe the best about people and you don't have a critical spirit? Are you committed to love for the long haul?

Living in the true self brings along the fuel of God's abiding love with us each day. The Holy Spirit within us provides that love in our hearts. The false self is always there wanting to get a wider space of our heart. Let the presence of God all around you fill you, protect you, open your eyes to see the good in yourself and others; live in joy because of the hope you have, and follow Christ who persevered to the cross in love for you and I.

O give thanks to the Lord, for he is good, for his steadfast love endures forever. Regardless of how you are feeling, I want to encourage you to develop a habit to say something like that each morning. Agape love is the way of God in Christ – the way to follow with perseverance. Each day give thanks and practise coming to the filling station of God's love. Talk with him, read the word and share with others. In spite of life's challenges, losses and disappointments that will get you moving with joy for God's Kingdom and inspire passionate followers of Christ. Amen.