

February 12, 2017

Authentic Christianity
How Loving are You?
1 Corinthians 13

Opening words: Webster defines “authentic” as: genuine or real; not false or copied. The issue of being authentic is important. Our world will tolerate many things, but our world will not tolerate a hypocrite. It is true in the secular world and it is true in the life of the church. In the life of the church, there is no room for hypocrites. It is not enough to know the words of the creeds; we must live a life worthy of Jesus. We must be authentic Christians. This is sermon number six in my eight-part sermon series, *Authentic Christianity*.

We find ourselves this morning in First Corinthians. You may remember the background. Corinth is a Greek city. The population totaled 650,000. Within that massive population was a small Christian congregation. Paul wrote his letter to this congregation about the year 55. Paul wrote this letter because the congregation had fractured. If the church was going to live up to their full potential, then the church must find a way to unite. It is really a pitiful scene. The congregation has everything it needs to succeed, except one thing, love. Paul recognizes their deficiency and pens these words for the ages. Paul knew what we often forget. A congregation that lacks love, lacks everything. In our time, we spend far too much time talking about money and programs. Through the eyes of God, those things really don't matter. The only thing that really matters in the life of the church is love. That leads us to our question for today. *How loving are you?*

1 Corinthians 13 If I speak in the tongues of men or of angels, but do not have love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal. ² If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have a faith that can move mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. ³ If I give all I possess to the poor and give over my body to hardship that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing. ⁴ Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. ⁵ It does not dishonor others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. ⁶ Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. ⁷ It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. ⁸ Love never fails. But where there are prophecies, they will cease; where there are tongues, they will be stilled; where there is knowledge, it will pass away. ⁹ For we know in part and we prophesy in part, ¹⁰ but when completeness comes, what is in part disappears ¹¹ When I was a child, I talked like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I put the ways of childhood behind me. ¹² For now we see only a reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known. ¹³ And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love.

1 Corinthians 13:13 says, *"And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love."* If that sounds familiar, say, **"Amen!"**

In 1919, silent screen stars Jean Acker and Rudolph Valentino met at a party. The two began to date. Two months later, on November 6, they got married. Those who attended the wedding said it was beautiful. Their ceremony was the highlight of their relationship, because their honeymoon was a disaster. History tells us, Jean locked Rudolph out of their honeymoon suite. In reality, their marriage was over six hours after it began. Someone needed to tell Jean Acker and Rudolph Valentino the truth about love. Love is not an emotion. Love is a commitment. They are not the only ones. There are many people who are confused about love.

The reason is, we use the word "love" so casually. Let me give you a few examples. I love hot peppers. The hotter the better. The best peppers clear out my sinuses. I love eating frozen Snickers bars right out of the freezer. I love sitting outside on a hot summer night listening to the crickets. I love my children and I love my wife. I love my dog, the world's best dog, Macy. I love my granddaughter, Pippa. I love shrimp with cocktail sauce. I love America and I love my job. I love being right and saying, "I told you so." Do you get the point? We use the word love not just continuously. We use the word love casually. Just think about it for a moment. That means I have equated my feelings for my wife with hot peppers. I don't think she finds that flattering. No wonder so many are confused about love.

Last May, I was down in Atlanta for a preaching conference. After dinner, I walked through the lobby of my hotel. I was wearing my faded Cleveland Indians baseball cap. The hotel's van driver saw my cap. He pointed at me and said, "Go Tribe!" I pointed back and said to him, "Go Tribe!" I stopped and talked with him. I asked him, "Are you an Indians fan?" He said, "No, sir! I was raised here in Atlanta. I am a Braves fan. I am like most fans here. We love the Braves, Falcons and Hawks, but only when they win. If they don't win, we don't care." I thought, what kind of love is that? In northeast Ohio, we love the Indians.

Several months later, the Indians were in the World Series. You remember, our beloved Indians played the Chicago Cubs. Like many, I was excited. You know the truth. It is more fun to win. It was easy to love the Indians. They made it all the way to the seventh game of the World Series. That game was in Cleveland. Like many, I watched it at home. Can I be honest with you? The crowd seemed strange that night. I couldn't believe what I was hearing. There seemed to be as many Chicago fans in the stadium as Cleveland fans. Later I learned why. Many Cleveland fans sold their tickets to Chicago fans. One guy spoke for many. He said, "The money was too big to pass up." I thought, what kind of love is that? There are many who are confused about love. If you love someone or something, say, **"Amen!"** In the English language, we have one word for all kinds of love.

In Biblical Greek, there are six different words for various kinds of love.

1. **Eros** is the Greek word for passionate love.
2. **Philia** is the Greek word for friendship love.
3. **Ludus** is the Greek word for playful love.
4. **Agape** is the Greek word for worldwide love.
5. **Pragma** is the Greek word for long lasting love.
6. **Philautia** is the Greek word for self-love.

To unlock the scripture lesson for today, you must discover which of those words for love Paul is using in 1 Corinthians 13. The answer is, agape love, or worldwide love. It is the highest form of love. Agape love is unconditional love. It was at this point in my sermon preparation I got stumped. On Thursday afternoon, I sat on my couch and wondered why Paul would make such a big fuss over agape love. I sat there awhile. My wife saw me sitting there and asked me if I was sick. A couple of minutes later, she asked me why I wasn't doing something. Both times, I said, "No. I'm just thinking." I guess, she isn't used to me thinking. I thought for quite a while and then it hit me.

Paul uses agape love for one reason. He is not addressing a couple being united in marriage. That is eros love. He is addressing a single congregation. Just like time and money, every congregation has limited energy. How that congregation spends their energy is very important. Every congregation must decide for themselves: Is the energy in the life of that church going to go inward? Or, is the energy in the life of the church going to outward? Inward energy is self-destructive. We call it "conflict". Outward energy is productive. It goes outside of the church and makes disciples for the transformation of the world. Think about it for a moment. In this church, do we spend our energy inwardly, fighting and bickering with one another about silly things? Or, do we spend our limited energy outwardly, making disciples for the transformation of the world? Your observation is very revealing. In the week, how much time have you spent talking about Jesus? In the past week, how much time have you spent talking about your passion?

Later that afternoon, I googled the phrase, "what do churches need to be successful?" I came across an article written by Steve Murrell. He and his wife, Deborah, went to the Philippines in 1984. They founded a church called Victory Manila, which now has 14 locations in Metro Manila. That church founded a larger organization, Every Nation. Here are six things he says every pastor needs to succeed in the ministry.

1. **Calling** – discover what God wants you to do with your life
2. **Commitment** – work hard at your calling
3. **Concentration** – focus on your passion
4. **Honor God** – we are not the stars
5. **Make Disciples** – nothing else matters
6. **Community** – pastors get too much credit and blame for success and failure. Pastors and congregations are in the ministry together. That means you and I are in the ministry together.

The Apostle Paul and Steve Murrell are saying the same thing. No church reaches its full potential if the members of that church don't get along. That leads us back to our question of the day. How loving are you? The question is not about tolerance. The question is about true love. If that question makes you think, say, "**Amen!**"

On April 18, Kathryn and I are going back to Russia for three weeks. We are going to teach English. Our partner in Russia is working on our agenda. We are spending a week in a school for English translators. We are going to spend a week in a public school right outside of Moscow. We are going to spend a week in Dmitrov, the home of the orphanage with the disabled children. We are looking forward to seeing Vlad, Kolya and Stas. Some people go to Virginia Beach or Fort Myers annually. We go to Dmitrov. It is a nice city of about 70,000. I am looking forward to this trip.

When I am in Dmitrov, I like to attend a little Russian Orthodox Church outside of the walls of the orphanage. There is nothing impressive about it. It is just a tiny neighborhood church. Yet, without knowing the language or traditions, I surprisingly find myself at home there. That little church feeds my soul. In Russia, Russian Orthodox churches have no pews. Everyone stands the entire time. We stand in the back and try to blend in. The truth is, we stick out like sore thumbs. On Sunday morning, the little church is always crowded. I remember one Sunday morning in January standing in the back of that church. Every couple of minutes the outside door would open to let people in or out. Every time the door opened, cold air rushed in. One time the door opened and a young couple walked in. They were a classic young Russian couple. She was holding a baby. He was holding a toddler by the hand. The toddler did what toddlers do. Within a few minutes, the toddler grew restless. The child started to cry and everyone looked at them. I felt bad for the young couple. I felt worse when an old Russian woman came up to the couple, said something stern to them and pointed to the door. She kept pointing at the door until the young couple with their children left. The unconditional love in that church seemed to have been absent that day. Can I ask you a question?

How many people in the history of this church have been shown the door? We may not have done it with a pointed finger, but we have done it. We may have done it with the words behind their backs. We may have done it with our attitude about them. We may have done it with our behavior. It is always sad when someone is shown the door and told to get out. It is sad because the potential of that church is never reached. The church is not a social club. The church is the bride of Christ. Can I ask you our question for today one more time? How loving are you?

1 Corinthians 13:13 says, "*And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love.*" And all of God's people said, "**Amen!**"

Will you pray with me?