

## “Sweet Land of Liberty”

Scripture: 1 Corinthians 13:1-13

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As many of you know, the lectionary is a suggested guide for Christian worship throughout the entire world and among many different denominations. I am a lectionary preacher by convenience—I find it convenient to follow a disciplined plan of Bible readings. Otherwise, you would get my latest whim or flight of fantasy! One of the lectionary readings for this Sunday is the text that Lewis Fowler used last Sunday, 1 Corinthians 13. Given his marvelous interpretation last Sunday, the easy thing would be to choose another text. However, Lewis inspired me to go back to this wonderful text. If you were here last Sunday, you may recall that he asked us to go home and read it again...and again. So, in case you did do that (and even if you did!), this text bear repeating.

In some ways, repeating this text is like the opera story of a rising star on the opera circuit making his first appearance in Milan, in Italy, the home of opera. The young star sang an aria and the crowd burst out in applause that stopped the show. So, he sang the aria again. Again, the crowd burst out into applause. So, he sang it again. When the crowd burst out into applause again, the performer broke character and said, “Folks, the show must go on, so you can’t expect me to sing that aria again.” And a voice came from the crowd yelled out, “You will sing it again until you get it right!”

1 Corinthians 13 is a text to repeat over and over again...until we get it right. And although this text is often read at weddings, it addresses love in more a universal scope than the love between a husband and wife.

**13** *If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. <sup>2</sup> And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. <sup>3</sup> If I give away all my possessions, and if I hand over my body so that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing.*

*<sup>4</sup> Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant <sup>5</sup> or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; <sup>6</sup> it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. <sup>7</sup> It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. <sup>8</sup> Love never ends. But as for prophecies, they will come to an end; as for tongues, they will cease; as for knowledge, it will come to an end. <sup>9</sup> For we know only in part, and we prophesy only in part; <sup>10</sup> but when the complete comes, the partial will come to an end. <sup>11</sup> When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child; when I became an adult, I put an end to childish ways. <sup>12</sup> For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known. <sup>13</sup> And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love.*

One of the first songs that I learned by heart was “My Country ‘Tis of Thee.” The memory work was made easier by rhyming: “My country, ‘tis of Thee, sweet land of liberty.” Sweet land of liberty—often what liberty has meant to me is what it means to a sailor, to those in the navy. Liberty is a word for “shore leave,” when you are “off-duty” and can do what you please. Liberty has meant freedom from requirements and restraints. Liberty has meant no oughts, no musts, no shoulds, no “have to”s.

And what poor understanding of liberty that is! In many ways, what the apostle Paul is addressing is a poor understanding of liberty, when liberty is defined in terms my personal choice for what I want. For there is a different kind of liberty...the liberty to choose not my will but God’s will. And that is true liberty. True liberty is choosing God’s way...not my way. What Paul describes in 1 Corinthians 13 is what true liberty looks like...the way of love.

It is often been noted that the apostle Paul had three perfectly good words for love in the Greek language in which he was writing. And we need not be surprised by the multiple ways to say “love.” What’s the difference in the following: “I really like spinach...I adore spinach...I love spinach.” Multiple ways to communicate much of the same message.

In Paul’s day, there were at least three good words for love. One very common word for love was *eros*, from which we derive English words like “erotic.” That is the love of passion, of desire, of want. And yes, that can be expressed as physical, but we know that love...the way people feel about their beloved Vols, the way a person feels about a home, and so on. *Eros* is about the desirable-ness of the beloved. Paul could have used the word *eros* for love—we love what is desirable.

Another perfectly good word for love that Paul could have used is *philos*. And *philos* has English derivatives: philosophy—the lover of “Sophia” or wisdom, Philadelphia—brotherly love, philanthropy—lover of humanity, and so on. *Philos* is love among equals, among folks who share mutual interests. *Philos* is about “I help you; you help me. We both enjoy it.” If you know who Barney is...that purple dragon...you know the Barney love song:

I love you. You love me. We're a happy family.  
With a great big hug and kiss from me to you  
Won't you say you love me too?

That's *philos* love...it is good for you and it is good for me.

The intriguing thing is that Paul did not choose either of these perfectly good words for love—*eros* and *philos*. Instead, he chose a Greek word that was relatively little used in the first century. As Lewis Fowler mentioned last week, we live in a culture that defines love in so many wrong ways. We don't have right definition for love. And Paul lived in a culture that also misdefined love, so he chose a relatively obscure word of his day to define the nature of love. The word is *agape*.

From linguistic studies, it appears that *agape* has more to do with choice, with resolve, with decision. Contrast that to *eros*—the love that just sweeps us off our feet and demands no choice...just go with flow. Contrast that *philos*—a chosen love but one that is mutually good—love that is about benefits for the one who loves and for the beloved. Neither *eros* nor *philos* are wrong as such...there just inadequate, incomplete, partial. *Agape* is that love that I choose...a love that chooses not to be arrogant or rude, irritable or resentful...a love that is patient and kind...a love that chooses not to insist on its own way... a love that choose to bear all, believe all, to hope all, endure all.

And it takes freedom to make this kind of choice, not simply be governed by passion or even by what mutually beneficial for me and you. Free people can love like *agape*. Free people can choose humility over arrogance; serenity over irritableness; even not insisting on their way. Free people can live *agape*.

*Agape* is the “sweet land of liberty” where we can choose to be a servant, choose to let go, choose to be patient. No one is born into this land of liberty. No, we are born into world that says, “Only the strong survive.” A world that says, “You only go around once in live, so grab all the gusto you can get.” A world that says, “You have to look after number 1.” No one is born into this land of liberty of *agape*...except one. One child born in stable in Bethlehem in a backward part of the world not much better than Haiti. And that world put him to death, but the world could not kill his love, his *agape*. People keep following him, to die to this world, and be born anew into this “sweet land of liberty.”

On a Sunday in May last year, I told the story of Ethel Dunning...a story that bears repeating today because it speaks of this liberty to love. In the late 1960s, Ethel and Tom Dunning lived in a tenement shack on a farm outside Americus, Georgia. For over 26 years, they were sharecroppers—working someone else's land and were given a share of the produce. They worked hard but they would never own their own place. They had no inherited money. No bank would take a chance on them for a loan. They would live off the leftovers of someone else's life.

However, outside of Americus, Georgia, is a place called Koininia Farm, the birthplace of organization called “Partnership Housing.” The folks at Koininia Farm had this vision of partnering together to help poor people build their own house. Koininia Farm was viewed with great suspicion in and around Americus, Georgia, in the 1960s—they were said to be communists because they thought a person's dignity was not dependent on the skin color and that people ought to have the opportunity to live in decent housing. Clearly, God-hating Communists? Koininia Farm was actually a radical Christian community—they lived *agape*. And of one of the expressions of *agape* that came out of Koininia Farm was this Partnership Housing project that sought to help poor people build and own their house. Partnership Housing...where could that go? What good can from Americus, Georgia? They have only built over 300,000 homes across the US and internationally. You know them by their new name, Habitat for Humanity.

However, back when Habitat began, it was viewed with great suspicion. Both Koininia Farm and their housing projects were regularly vandalized. Respectable people did not have much to do with it. So when Ethel and Tom Dunning applied for and were accepted for a house, they found out quickly that their future prospects were not celebrated. The

woman who lived in the “big house,” which was near their shack, accused Tom and Ethel of “abandoning” her. The woman spent an entire morning, haranguing Ethel for their decision. How could they do this! Let’s see, Tom and Ethel lived in dilapidated shack that they would never own and they had the opportunity to move into their own, new house—and that was “abandoning” the woman who lived in the “big house.”

There was only one well that provided water to “the big house” (the home of this woman) and the shack (the home of Tom and Ethel). The day the woman in the “big house” learned Tom and Ethel were partnering to build their own house...that very day the shack had no water; the “big house” did. Water came into the same pipe; shack water could only be cut off from within the “big house” but it was the woman’s property after all. And so for four months, Ethel and Tom hauled in water. Every Friday night she went into Americus to wash their clothes.

One day, toward the end of this time, the lady phoned Ethel. She had a little problem. “Ethel,” she said, “my boy and his wife are coming to see us this weekend. Would you mind cooking us some of those special cakes you bake so well?” What would Ethel say? I know what I would have said to that woman...but I am not as free as Ethel was.

Ethel said, “Yes, ma’am, I’d be glad to cook ‘em—but you know I ain’t got no water!”  
“Oh, Ethel, that’s right. I’d forgotten. Well, could you come over here to my house and bake them?”

Here, in Ethel’s words, is what she did: “I went over there and worked all day long baking those fancy cakes. I didn’t say nothin’ ‘bout nothin.’ I just baked and baked. I was as nice as I could be.”

When asked how she could do that? How could she do that for someone who had made her life so miserable, Ethel simply said, “To do that, you’se got to be dead and be dug up!”

This is deep theology. To do that, you have to be dead to this world. You have to die...die with that one who died on a cross. You got to be dead to the chain reaction of “you hurt me and I’ll hurt you back.” And more than just dying, be “dug up,” be alive to *agape*, to live boldly in the “sweet land of liberty.”

So, once again hear the words about *agape*, but with a change. Taking out the word love and but in this case, put in the word, Christ.

Christ is patient; Christ is kind; Christ is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. Christ does not insist on his own way; he is not irritable or resentful; he does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. He bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

And that is so right...but here is what is even more right. Here’s what Ethel Dunning knew as one who was dead and dug up. Here’s what apostle Paul meant about being “in Christ.” We live where Christ lives. So hear those same words when we put in the pronoun, “I.”

I am patient; I am kind; I am not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. I do not insist on my own way; I am not irritable or resentful; I do not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoice in the truth. I bear all things, believe all things, hope all things, endure all things.

That’s a place I want to live. That’s country that Ethel Dunning lived: “My country ‘tis of thee, sweet land of liberty.”