

June 16, 2019
Rev. Kerry Smith

1 Corinthians 13:1–13 Won't You Be My Neighbor?
Greenland Hills United Methodist Church

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The Message

If I speak with human eloquence and angelic ecstasy but don't love, I'm nothing but the creaking of a rusty gate. If I speak God's Word with power, revealing all his mysteries and making everything plain as day, and if I have faith that says to a mountain, "Jump," and it jumps, but I don't love, I'm nothing. If I give everything I own to the poor and even go to the stake to be burned as a martyr, but I don't love, I've gotten nowhere. So, no matter what I say, what I believe, and what I do, I'm bankrupt without love. Love never gives up. Love cares more for others than for self. Love doesn't want what it doesn't have. Love doesn't strut, doesn't have a swelled head, doesn't force itself on others, isn't always "me first," doesn't fly off the handle, doesn't keep score of the sins of others, doesn't revel when others grovel, takes pleasure in the flowering of truth, puts up with anything, trusts God always, always looks for the best, never looks back, but keeps going to the end. Love never dies. Inspired speech will be over some day; praying in tongues will end; understanding will reach its limit. We know only a portion of the truth, and what we say about God is always incomplete. But when the Complete arrives, our incompletes will be canceled. When I was an infant at my mother's breast, I gurgled and cooed like any infant. When I grew up, I left those infant ways for good. We don't yet see things clearly. We're squinting in a fog, peering through a mist. But it won't be long before the weather clears and the sun shines bright! We'll see it all then, see it all as clearly as God sees us, knowing God directly just as God knows us! But for right now, until that completeness, we have three things to do to lead us toward that consummation: Trust steadily in God, hope unswervingly, love extravagantly. And the best of the three is love.

The Sunday after Pentecost is known as Trinity Sunday, a day that highlights the relationships that are at God's very core as Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer. We worship and believe in a God that exists in community as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. It is that community of the Trinity that describes God's perfect love. The community of God in the Trinity teaches us that love can never be known fully except in community. When I think of community, I think of Mister Rogers' Neighborhood.

Mister Rogers' Neighborhood was on PBS from 1968 to 2001. We started to hear about Mister Rogers again after the Sandy Hook Elementary School shooting in 2012. One of the things that Mister Rogers said brought comfort to the community of Newton, Connecticut. He had said, "When I was a boy and I would see scary things in the news, my mother would say to me, 'Look for the helpers. You will always find people who are helping.'" After every school shooting, Mister Rogers words bring us comfort once again. He makes us think of a time when we felt safe. He makes us think of the good in the world. After the rain bomb or hurricane or whatever the Sunday storm was, I watched neighbors helping neighbors, and I thought of Mister Rogers' words.

"Look for the helpers. You will always find people who are helping." There were even workers who came from states away to get electricity to all of us again. I think it wonderfully fitting that Greenland Hills member Catherine Credeur who originally and proudly hails from Louisiana had her power restored by a Centerpoint crew from Louisiana. She was ready to make them a big pot of gumbo to thank them, but they were pulling down the street when she got home from work.

We just heard some lovely words that Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians 13. They are words that we usually hear at weddings, which is why I wanted you to hear them in a different translation so that you could hear those familiar words in a new way. There's a song sung by the group Sylvan Esso called, "There Are Many Ways to Say I Love You" that is based on Mister Rogers' words. "There are many ways to say, 'I love you'. There are many ways to say, 'I care about you'. There are many ways to say, 'I love you'. Just by being there when things are sad and scary. Just by being there, being there. Being there to say, 'I love you'. Cleaning up a room can

say, 'I love you'. Hanging up a coat before you're asked to do it. Drawing special pictures for the holidays. And creating plays. You'll find many ways to say, 'I love you'. You'll find many ways to understand what love is. Many ways to say, 'I love you'." Those words make me think of 1 Corinthians: love never gives up. Love cares more for others than for self. Love doesn't strut, doesn't have a swelled head, doesn't force itself on others, isn't always "me first," doesn't fly off the handle, doesn't keep score of the sins of others, doesn't revel when others grovel, takes pleasure in the flowering of truth, puts up with anything, trusts God always, always looks for the best, never looks back, but keeps going to the end. Love never dies.

We saw evidence of love this week after the rain bomb on Sunday. Ron Hardy texted me Monday morning saying that he had a couple of chain saws if anyone needed help with downed trees. That is the church. That is what I hope you experienced through this storm. Neighbors helping one another, working together, checking to make sure that all was okay. When I went to the church Monday afternoon, the church power had just come on. I texted the Narcotics Anonymous group leader to let them know and their response was, "God watches over us." I thought about all of the people who would be able to go to a meeting that evening with God watching over them. That thought made me happy.

1 Corinthians says that love is best. It is greater than faith and hope. Maybe it is because love presupposes faith and faith makes love possible. Love is grounded in God and is a reminder for us of God's commitment toward all creatures. It is God's love for people that enables us to love others. Journalist Dorothy Day said, "We cannot love God unless we love each other, and to love we must know each other." Mister Rogers said, "Listening is where love begins: listening to ourselves and then to our neighbors."

One of my favorite stories in the Bible is when a Pharisee invites Jesus to have dinner with him and Jesus accepts the invitation. A woman, who the Bible says is a sinner, hears that Jesus is there, and she comes over with a jar of perfume. She stands at Jesus' feet weeping and begins to wet his feet with her tears. Then, she wipes Jesus' feet with her hair, kissing them and pouring perfume on them. That is love. The house owner gets upset. The Bible says, "he said to himself, 'If this man were a prophet, he would have known who and what kind of woman this is who is touching him – that she is a sinner.'" Simon complains about this woman making such a fuss and Jesus says, "Do you see this woman? I came into your house. You did not give me any water for my feet, but she wet my feet with her tears and wiped them with her hair. You did not give me a kiss, but this woman, from the time I entered, has not stopped kissing my feet. You did not put oil on my head, but she has poured perfume on my feet." Jesus says that this woman showed him great love (Luke 7:36-8:3).

This woman knew that if she could be in Jesus' presence she would receive healing. Something drove her forward, some pain in her life, some emptiness, some hurt. There were things in her life that kept her in pain and Jesus made her feel whole. She was hungry and she knew that Jesus was the bread of life. Her fear was replaced with tears. We don't know if the tears were about regret or relief or being seen for who she was. The whole thing was messier than expected but this woman's life had been messier than she expected. She took her hair, wiped Jesus' feet and kissed them. Those were kisses of freedom. Jesus knows us. Jesus sees us. We can cry tears of relief or regret or comfort that we are truly seen. God sent Jesus to claim us and to save us.

Simon sees what he wants to see. He sees what is easy to see. He sees an unclean person kneeling at Jesus' feet. He sees a sinner. The Gospel is where we find healing from the harm

done to us and it is where we find freedom.¹ The hard part about healing is that we can name the harm and be angry about the past, and it is a step toward healing but we cannot stay there. We have this idea from Jesus that the salvation of our enemy is tied up with our own because forgiveness is so important. The Gospel is powerful enough to heal people who hurt and to heal the people who have done the hurting. We are all trying to be faithful. We are trying to act in love, but we often hurt others without meaning to.

Mister Rogers said, “Love isn’t a state of perfect caring. It is an active noun like struggle. To love someone is to strive to accept that person exactly the way he or she is, right here and now.” It is a struggle to truly accept the other as they are. It is hard work to fight the impulse to re-form the other into who we want them to be. It takes active work to listen to those we love, accept who they are, and move forward with them. When we love a person, we accept a person exactly as is: the lovely with the unlovely, the strong along with the fearful, the true mixed in with the facade, and of course, the only way we can do it is by accepting ourselves that way. Loving ourselves, just as we are, may be the hardest part of all. It starts with self-acceptance. We can’t love the neighbor as ourselves if we don’t start there. In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, Amen.

¹ Thanks to Nadia Bolz-Weber’s book Shameless for this illustration.