

*February 3, 2019*

*I Corinthians 13:1-13:   **“Without Love , We Are Nothing”***

*Pilgrim Lutheran Church  
2155 North Oakland Avenue  
Decatur, Illinois 62526*

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

Luther writes:

God himself is love, and his being is nothing but pure love. Therefore if anyone wanted to draw and picture God in a telling way, he would have to draw a picture that showed nothing but love, as though the divine nature were nothing but the intense fire and fervor of a love that has filled heaven and earth.

“What is love?” we often ask. “God is love” the apostle John writes (1 John 4:16). One must begin by considering God in order to really know what love is. And Luther writes in one of his Heidelberg theses of 1518, “the love of God does not find but creates that in which it delights...”

In this life, we were supposed to know God’s love by virtue of the fact that he made us and was pleased to give himself to us in everything that had been made. His labor of love, his delight in us, was to be understood and received by us with a responding labor of love, in righteousness, to work the creation in order that the relationship he started between us and him would for us grow into a full understanding. One day, when our labor was to be done, we were to eat from the tree of life, and the veils of creation would be pulled back for us to see God as he is, and thereby enter into Sabbath rest - first a labor of love to then rest in eternal love.

Instead, humanity skipped the labor to be fruitful and multiply, to rule the creation, and eat from the tree of life, in order to chose an easy road by eating from the wrong tree right from the start. The very nature of all sin is to choose a quick and easy labor that is a fast track for the self, rather than a labor of love toward God and one another. It is the easy labor of sin that became the death of our relationship with God and the destruction of all that has been made. Easy labor is to skip the nuts and bolts of relationship with another for nothing but self gratification. When we are full of self, we are alone and dead.

Nevertheless, “for God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son!” In fact, before the foundation of the world, John writes (Rev. 13:8), our names were written in the book of the Lamb who was slain. God has made his love manifest to us sinners by sending his Son to become one of us that he might become sin for us, not because we loved him, but because he loved us. “Love is the fulfillment of the law,” it says in Romans 8:10. Jesus became a part of the creation, became one of us in order to love us by talking all the wrongs and making them right. He died on the cross so that God might delight in us. In fact, this is what kept Jesus on the cross. As it says in Hebrews, it was for the joy that was set before him (his undeserved delight in us) that “he endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God (12:1-2).” The love of God in Jesus Christ is an amazing thing.

Now, whenever we read or hear our epistle lesson, which is often referred to as “the love chapter” of the Bible, we need to understand that everything that is said about love here is first and foremost about God’s love for us in Jesus Christ, who did not come to abolish the law and the prophets. Rather, he came to fulfill everything on our behalf. Furthermore, our Savior says in Matthew 5, “for truly, I say to you, until

heaven and earth pass away, not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the Law until all is accomplished. Therefore whoever relaxes one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven.” To all who think that faith in Jesus Christ, who fulfilled the law for us in order that we might receive the forgiveness of sins, is somehow a permission to relax or break the law, we can see here that it is not. Let this be warning to all of us.

Jesus Christ did not die on the cross so that we can relax the law or, for that matter, maliciously and unrepentantly violate it. To do so, is to violate love for God and one another. Remember, the law is a labor of love, and since Christ has labored on the cross for us, his love touches us in such a way that we are to put to death everything that is a violation of his labor of love. He came to destroy sin and death. He did not come to destroy sin so that we might love it and live in it and lose our salvation.

This brings us back to the words of Luther in his Heidelberg theses. You will recall at the beginning of the sermon that he said, “the love of God does not find but creates that in which it delights...” That’s only part of it. Luther goes on to add, “...the love of man is generated by what it delights in.” Allow me to put it into perspective. If we delight in sin, we selfishly love ourselves, and in doing so we are counted as loveless. In such self love, we are all alone. It is here that the opening of our epistle lesson hits us right between the eyes. Paul describes this state of affairs as being without love. God is love, and if we do not have God through his one and only Son, we are without true love and counted as nothing.

In the first three verses of our lesson we come to our theme, a partial rewording of Paul’s words: **Without Love, We are Nothing.** Who I am is nothing without God, who is love. This causes us to object by saying, “surely, there is something in me that counts, somehow!” Nope, not apart from the one who is absolute love. Paul says that without the sort of love that makes God who he is and what he gives, who we are is nothing, and this makes sense. If he had not delighted in us before we were even born, we would truly be nothing and unconscious or non-existent. But even now, when we are fully aware, apart from the love of God, what we say is hollow - vanity/meaningless, who we are is nothing, and we gain nothing. That’s what Paul says.

It is from this point that Paul then begins to describe the love that is first Jesus and then, because of Jesus, us. He writes: “Love is patient and kind; love does not envy or boast; it is not arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice at wrongdoing, but rejoices with the truth. Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never ends.” If you don’t mind, I would like to add the words of Solomon to further our understanding of what Paul says when he writes, “Love never ends.” Solomon puts it in this way: “Set me as a seal upon your heart, as a seal upon your arm, for love is strong as death, jealousy is fierce as the grave. Its flashes are flashes of fire, the very flame of the Lord (Song of Solomon 8:6).”

**Without Love, We are Nothing.** Death is the full experience of nothing. Such death is to have separated ourselves from our lover. But, when our lover delights in us, as he has through death and resurrection so that we may delight in him alone, there is love. As John writes in his first epistle, “God is

love, and whoever abides in love abides in God, and God abides in him (1 John 4:16b).” It is in the love of God through Jesus Christ that whatever has been said becomes meaningful and is no longer vanity. It is in the love of God through Jesus Christ that we are transformed into someone. It is in the love of God through Jesus Christ that we gain everything - again, none of it from ourselves, but only through the love of the one who undeservedly delights in us.

The apostle John bids us to abide in love. How does one labor in such a way? Jesus himself tells us of this labor in the parable of the vine and the branches. He is the vine and we are the branches, apart from him we can do nothing. In the same parable, Jesus invites us to remain in him and he will remain in us. 1 John 4:13 says that “we know that we abide in him and he in us, because he has given us of his Spirit.” And how do you know that you have been given the Spirit? You know that you have been given the Spirit when you believe in Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of sins, for no one can believe the things that come from the Spirit, unless the Spirit of God lives in him (1 Cor. 2:12). And how have you received such a faith and Spirit? Faith is created and preserved by hearing the Word and receiving the Sacraments.

If you would have Jesus, if you would have love, if you would have faith and the Spirit, all these come and remain in the three that testify - the Word, Baptism, and the Lord’s Supper (1 John 5:6-12). Whoever has this testimony has the Son of God. Our labor, until we reach the kingdom of glory, is to use the means of grace (Word, Baptism, and the Lord’s Supper). There we find Christ and the love that lasts forever. In the day when Jesus appears and the veils of preaching, water, wine and bread are removed, we are told that “we shall be like him, because we shall see him as he is. And everyone who thus hopes in him purifies himself as he is pure (1 John 3:2-3).” We will rest from our labors. Our deeds will follow us, for the labor of his love in this life gives way to the forever living in his love with all that has been, is, and ever will be.

In the meantime, the words of the apostle John: “Beloved, let us love one another, for love is from God, and whoever loves has been born of God and knows God. Anyone who does not love does not know God, because God is love . . . We love because he first loved us (1 John 4).”

Amen.

Pastor Brock Abbott