

# SAN MARINO CONGREGATIONAL UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST

## Reflections by Pastor Donald Shenk (Delivered on Sunday, January 30, 2022)

Text: 1 Corinthians 13:1-13 (NRSV)

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. 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. 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.

Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

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. For we know only in part, and we prophesy only in part; but when the complete comes, the partial will come to an end. 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. 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. And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love.

Reflecting with Pastor Donald Shenk:

### ***“Verbing Love”***

As anybody who has ever been in a relationship will tell you – love is work!

Now, my mate, Erik, tends to balk at that statement as a fact, but, well, I think that’s proof of that statement’s veracity, don’t you?!

Reading through this extraordinary passage from I Corinthians 13 that Pat presented so well for us today, I was taken by how incredible it is that Paul, he of the homophobic, sexist, and some might even say, misogynistic utterances throughout his letters, doesn’t allow even one shred of his sometimes harsh rhetoric to invade these verses. Rather, Paul seems to be growing up before our very eyes as he puts forth the many attributes of love, admitting that when he was a child he thought and spoke and reasoned like a child, but is now an adult and putting an end to childish ways.

And a huge part of putting away those childish ways means, for all of us, I think, putting an end to the games we play to see if we can make people love us or the deceits we indulge in to hurt another because we ourselves feel unloved.

Contrary to its appearance, here in his letter to those new Christians worshipping together at Corinth, Paul isn’t so much listing what love IS (like those little oval comics in the newspaper) as exhorting those who have come together to be active in their love.

Rather than seeing love as a noun, in fact, I think Paul is verbing the word Love to bring to the forefront of their consciousness AND ours, how we can show love in order to strengthen our community and bring about the kin-dom of God as Christ exemplified throughout his life here on earth.

And, yes, “verbing” is an actual word found in the dictionary, meaning the conversion of nouns into verbs, which writer Chi Luu tells us is “not actually a new phenomenon...[but one which] linguistic nerds call denominalization [and that which] Benjamin Franklin preferred to call “awkward and abominable.”

But the verbing of the word LOVE can be justified not only through the words of Paul, but through the many ways in which love can be seen in action throughout the lives of those who are verbing love every day.

John Ruegg is 83 years old and lives alone. His wife, Joan, who is around the same age, lives about 20 miles away because she is confined to a bed with Alzheimer’s disease. Every other day, in a ritual carried out thousands of times around the country, John leaves his house at about 10:00 A.M., gets in his car, drives the 20 miles, and spends the day with his wife even though she now no longer recognizes him. It is a habit, he says, that he has practiced for more than six years. Asked why he visits his wife three times a week, shares meals with her, reads the Bible to her, and holds her hand, John bows his head slowly and then, with tears in his eyes, looks up and says, “Because I love her and she loves me.”

That’s the kind of love Paul is talking about here in Corinthians and it’s the kind of love that goes beyond anything we as humans could show without the love of God in our hearts.

Gert Dunn is 86 years old and attends church every Sunday. She needs assistance to get out of a chair yet is involved in evangelism efforts at her church. Every morning, Gert pulls out her prayer list and prays, by name, for people’s needs. Then, once a week, she sends a hand-written prayer card to the people on the list letting them know they are cared for and loved by God.

This is the kind of church WE are part of, you know. There are any number of you sitting out there right now that practice this verbing love – sending cards, making phone calls, listening deeply and caring profoundly. And when a church like ours practices that kind of love, and works at showing the kind of love Paul talks about in his letter, we remain a vibrant, active, and alive church even when the pandemic lowers our numbers and we look around to see fewer faces in our pews than we used to.

As the wonderful Dr. Bruce Epperly writes so insightfully, “Fidelity to God and fulfilling God’s message is not a matter of achievement or giftedness or signs and wonders, but love that is revealed in day-to-day actions. Love that is patient, kind, sacrificial, and compassionate. This love, commended in I Corinthians 13, is fallible, recognizes its limitations, leaves room for growth, and trusts God’s larger vision as we construct our own visions. Healthy love is open-ended: it does not assume it knows everything or understands reality fully; it makes room for

creativity, hospitality, and adventure. We see in a mirror dimly, and we don't have all the answers, but we can respond lovingly as a first step in healing the world."

It doesn't matter if we have every good thing in this world or the respect of our friends and family. It doesn't matter if we are the smartest person in the room or in the universe or even if we have so much faith that we could actually make Democrats and Republicans agree in Congress, if we don't have and SHOW the kind of love Paul talks about in his love letter, we are nothing, we have nothing, we gain nothing.

Melanie Howard, a professor up at Fresno Pacific says that this chapter of Paul's letter isn't so much a "Hallmark-style ode to sentimentalized ideas of love [but] offers what should be a foundational ethic for the church community...rather than taking a clear side in the debate, Paul urges his audience to pursue love, even amid differences and dissent.

"What most English translations fail to capture," she writes, "is that all these descriptors [of what love is] are verbs, not the adjectives with which they are often translated. So, these descriptions might be better translated along the lines of, "Love waits patiently; love acts kindly" and so forth. What might seem like a pedantic grammatical point, is actually quite important. That is, the love that Paul is describing takes action; it is not a passive feeling toward another."

As we go into our Annual meeting today, I encourage you to think about how we can put our love into action this year. The Trustees have started the ball rolling in a big way by not only taking care of our own within this church family, but by heeding the call, urged on by our outgoing Moderator, Pat, and enthusiastically endorsed by our Board of Trustees to not only up our mission giving but to double it. Yes, you heard right – if you studied the budget at all, you may have noticed that we will be allocating \$80,000 to be distributed to our mission partners this year! Isn't that amazing? I encourage you to join your leadership today in voting yes on this important aspect of who we are as a church that we might act out in love this year and every year we're together.

Let me leave you with these words I found from a professor at Luther Seminary, Jennifer Pietz who says that "the experience of being truly loved is transformative."

"When someone who sees both our virtues and our flaws is committed to walking with us through life's highs and lows, it strengthens us and helps us to live more fully as ourselves," she writes. "As seen so often during this trying past year, people often come to know love precisely when they are at the end of their own strength or resources and others step in to give sacrificially of themselves. Such experiences can change us and motivate us to in turn love and care for others."

With love,

Amen.