

**Sunday, February 3, 2019 – Fifth Sunday after Epiphany**  
**“Limitless Love”**

1 Corinthians 12:31-13:13

Rev. Derek S. Klemm, Mountain View Lutheran Church, Las Vegas, NV  
Definition Structure

Grace, mercy and peace to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, Amen.

Sometimes it's a little strange to preach on a text that is already so straightforward and poetic that adding words only complicates the issue but I'm going to take the risk this morning because all Scripture is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness. This beautiful text from 1 Corinthians 13 waxes eloquent on love.

Yet, we get confused on the subject. We've all heard the old saying that the Inuit have over 100 words for snow. Many of you have also heard the Greek language has five different words interchangeable in English for "love." Yet no matter how precise we might try to be to narrow down exactly of which love we speak the fact of the matter is human language is imprecise to the genuine article, the way that "love" in its' purest form exists as an attribute of God – every definition of human love, whether we describe it as emotion, action, attitude is going to be only a dim image of something far beyond our comprehension in relation to that same word ascribed to God.

Maybe it's better to start with what love is not. If you've ever labored under the delusion of finding a perfect church somewhere "out there," good luck. If you've ever fallen for the idea that at one time the church was more "pure" and better than it is today, and thought that time was the church in its earliest days, then take some solace in knowing that Paul, Peter, James, John and Jude spill a ton of ink cajoling, encouraging, rebuking Christian audiences with a ton of problems – pretty much everyone other than Philippi has major issues of some kind. Maybe none more so than Corinth. Pretty much the whole lot are Gentile converts, new not only to "The Way," as Christianity was then known but brand new to the Hebrew Scriptures and culture as well.

We can group the bazillion individual issues in Corinth down to three main problems. 1. Pride in knowledge being the answer to all their problems. There were many in the church in Corinth who were too good for the basics, saw themselves as superior in knowledge and looked down with disdain on those who didn't know as much as them – all the while considering themselves to be beyond the care and instruction of their pastor or Paul himself. This

“knowledge” focus took people away from any sense of a life of humble obedience to God’s law – they already knew it all and knew how to moderate temptations that might lead them into sin. So some, despite knowing it might offend the consciences of the “weak” or “simple” among them drink to excess, or show up for business lunches at the pagan temples and eat food sacrificed to idols, or insist on freedom to abandon their marriages on a whim, all under the guise of “I know enough to be spiritually safe in this, who are you to judge me?” 2. A focus on exceptional gifts of the Spirit. People puffed up with pride, each imagining themselves in direct communication with God and speaking with His inspiration – prophecy, speaking in tongues, but not in a way that edifies everyone but in a way that marks the individual as being special or important. Leave the work of hospitality, service to the simpletons – not to mention faith, hope or love – mere child’s play, these three. 3. Self-serving – whatever benefits me. I’ll conveniently ignore God’s Word when it has to do with what I want or what makes me happy, and insist that others turn a blind eye to it, too. Hence Holy Communion, instead of an expression of unity in the Body of Christ, hosted by Christ Himself, gets turned into a drunken multicourse meal, with the wealthy in the warm, opulent inner room of the home while the poor in the congregation get veritable scraps out on the patio. And then there’s the unnamed man having inappropriate relations with his stepmother as the congregation turns a blind eye.

Lest we point fingers at Corinth and say, “Oh my, can you believe what they’re doing?” the right response to such rebukes is always self-examination. Where do I fall in all of this? Perhaps my behaviors are not identical to theirs but are there places where I pridefully consider myself more knowledgeable and “beyond the basics,” and thus it’s alright to do what I want with reckless abandon for the sake of how it’ll impact others around me? Do I exalt certain roles or responsibilities or gifts from God as being more special, more prominent, more holy than others? Do I covet the positions or giftedness of others? Do I look down on people who don’t understand what I do, or do as much as I do, or care as much as I do? Do I think of myself as more “advanced” than others? Do faith hope and love take a back seat to me, myself and I? Am I self-serving? Do I ignore what God’s Word says to justify and excuse myself or someone I love? Do I pick and choose and focus only on the parts that impact me and my life?

This kind of reflection is good because it leads us to confession. It exposes what love isn't. What love isn't in us, in our personal lives, in how we live with our families, in how we treat our coworkers, bosses or employees, in how we talk about our community and our government, and especially how we live as the body of Christ with each other and in God's mission to the world. Do the extent we participate in these things, we "have not love."

That confession leads to forgiveness. Confession leads to awareness, and a new heart, that sees the ways we do not love and guides us, under God's Word, to love each other not in pride or arrogance but in sacrifice. It makes us patient to endure others' shortcomings. Annoying behaviors, surly attitudes, gaps in knowledge, differences in culture or background, rough around the edges speech and behavior. It takes us out of a "me-focused" emphasis in church too – the songs I like to sing, the time I like to worship, the space I like to meet in, the person I like teaching, the responsibilities I'm asked to do, the direction or emphases I prefer to be taking place, the resentment I feel when change comes and new people have different perspectives or needs that shake up the status quo in "my church." Love for the neighbor stops looking for reasons to self-justify. Stops looking for reasons to protect turf. Starts looking for ways to sacrifice for the sake of others – to make things as easy, winsome and welcoming as possible for those who are just getting to know Jesus. And just like in a marriage where each partner has different perspectives as we all do this for each other and learn to live in trust that our needs and perspectives will be valued by each other, we can live in vulnerability to know and be known.

That's what happens through Jesus – in Him you are fully known – yes, your sins and your needs but also your gifts and passions. He knew full well exactly what He was getting in you when He gave Himself up for you on the cross. He knew that about all the other people He died and rose for, too.

See, the things we often strive for, like the church in Corinth, amount to a thimbleful compared to what will be when everything is revealed at the end. The knowledge we pride ourselves in – elementary compared to what will be revealed. The prophecy and the gifts – shadows of the telling of God's story that will be common knowledge when Jesus returns – and you won't even need words to communicate it, you'll see it plainly with your own eyes, right in

front of you. Self-serving will have no place whatsoever when you're being served by God's hand at an eternal celebration feast. These things are a drop compared to the ocean of what will be. But with love, that ocean at the end comes splashing into our present with greater force than a tsunami. Love won through Jesus, splashing through all the days of your life in baptism floods those around you in love when it is exhibited and lived out. As we love each other in our words, in our thoughts, in our actions, we meet Jesus in each other. Our community meets Jesus through us. This love is even more basic than the command to go and make disciples. Whatever else we have and are, if we have not love I'm a clanging gong, am nothing, gain nothing. But in the love of Jesus we, imperfect as we are, are enabled to love with the force and impact of all its' power and fullness to be revealed at the end.

Paul says it better than I could ever hope to say it to you, so let's have him have the last word. "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." In Jesus' name, Amen.