

THESE THREE THINGS
I Corinthians 13

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It is very hard to grasp and absorb the beauty and wisdom in words we've heard many times. I Corinthians 13 is read at so many weddings that it became a joke in the movie, "Wedding Crashers." Still, I read this passage at weddings because I need to hear it. I need to be reminded again and again of what love is, of how love acts. Love is patient, love is kind. Love is not irritable or resentful. It is not jealous or boastful, arrogant or rude.

No amount of repetition seems like too much for me because I become irritable and resentful, and when I do, the fact that these words are in my mind helps me to catch myself, stop in my tracks. Do I want to live in a place of resentment? Or do I want to be more loving? I can't be both.

The apostle Paul is giving us some magnificently practical advice in this passage. He's reminding us of what I want every person at every wedding to remember, that **love isn't a feeling**. Love is how we act. Love consists of the choices we make. We make a deliberate decision to be patient, to be kind. We're not perfect at it, we're not consistent, but we can be intentional.

I also read these words at many funerals and memorial services. They are such perfect words when we celebrate the life of someone who loved, someone who was loved. In this passage, Paul describes what he thinks heaven is like - a place where we see God face to face.

And the words of I Corinthians 13 remind us that - at the end of life - all other things fade away. When you are at the bedside of a person you love, and that person is dying, and you both know it, neither of you is thinking about their possessions, their investment portfolio, their career, their resume, their college education or the lack of any of the above. There is a purifying moment of clarity about what it is that matters most.

The question I always ask when I visit someone at the end of life is, "Are you at peace?" If they're not, it never has anything to do with which car they purchased, how messy they've left the attic, all of the things we fret about. It always has to do with the persons they love the most. We have conversations about forgiveness, about regrets. Conversations about how much and how well love has been shared. One person said to me, not an hour before he died, "I wish I'd been kinder." These are the things that matter most.

And Paul knew it.

Faith, Hope and Love. These three things. The last verse of our passage, the last verse of the 13th chapter of I Corinthians reads, "Now faith, hope, and love remain - these three things - and the greatest of these is love."

Let's sit with that last verse for a few minutes this morning, these words many of us have heard thousands of times, and see what light might break forth from them if we look at them closely.

These three things - faith, hope and love. These three things give our lives a three-way orientation.

It is love that grounds us. Love keeps our feet planted, love gives our lives balance. The fact that we are loved unconditionally is the solid foundation every life needs.

Hope is what keeps us moving in a forward direction. Hope is the belief that God is already in the future, and that because God is there, the future is not to be feared. Hope gives us forward momentum.

And faith propels us to regularly stop, and experience moments of awe and transcendence, to look up either figuratively or literally. Faith reminds us that there is more to life than what we can explain or comprehend. As someone once said in a prayer of grace before a meal, "We are part of a Mystery we do not understand, and we are grateful."

This was the orientation of Jesus' life. His feet were firmly planted in the soil of this earth. His parables were about the stuff of every day - about relationships between fathers and sons, about poor women searching for lost coins, about the resentment we feel when we think someone was treated better than we have been treated. He knew what our lives were like because he walked this earth, too.

Yet Jesus lived in hope. He was especially hopeful about humanity. He believed that people could change for the better, whether it was Zacchaeus the tax collector, the woman at the well, or the rigid rule-bound Pharisees. He brought people towards a better future when he healed them, restoring them to their communities.

And here's what we learn about faith from Jesus. It's not easy. Sometimes it's a gift, but mostly it comes from **practice**. Jesus took the time to develop his spiritual

muscle. Time away, time apart, time alone. Praying, walking, talking, arguing with God...noticing the world around him and all its majestic beauty.

Jesus' life had a three-way orientation - he was grounded, he was hopeful, and he nurtured his spiritual life - finding faith through moments of awe and wonder.

Is there a relationship between faith, hope and love? Is there an energy there we can tap into when we are struggling to experience any of these virtues in our lives, or when we feel depleted of all of them? What do we do when we aren't feeling our best selves, when we want to act in loving ways but we just can't seem to find it within ourselves?

Here's how one writer puts it - "...faith is nothing in itself but the openness of our heart to God's love". Faith is the instrument that opens us to God's love. It puts us in touch with the source of love itself. Faith allows us to draw from that source so that love can show itself in our lives."

In real life, it might work something like this. You know those tense moments, when all you feel is anger or frustration. You know those moments in a relationship when things have become so complicated you no longer know what love looks like. Sometimes we try to summon up love from within us and we just feel that the well is dry. Perhaps that is when we turn to faith so that we open ourselves to the source of love itself. Imagine it this way. Let's say a friend asks you to come over and water her plants next week when she's away on vacation. You go to her backyard, you find her watering can, you turn on the spigot but no water comes out of the hose. You could stay there all day, but that source of water just isn't producing. Instead, you try the hose on the side of the house - fill your watering can there. God can help restore our

capacity to love and to be loved. It doesn't always happen the first time, or quickly, or easily. But if we are resourceful and patient, we'll find the source is there. It's true, it's reliable, we can count on it.

When faith, hope and love are combined in our lives, and working together, we are accessing a power that will transform us and our world.

I know a lot of admirable people. At the top of my list are people who choose to love when love is difficult. We have several members of this congregation who have served or are currently serving as foster parents. One family fostered several children during the pandemic. The privacy rules are strict, for good reason, so these children were never publicly on our prayer list, but many many weeks, I received prayer requests for these families before our Wednesday evening prayer services. The transition times were especially fraught - when children were going from one home to another, mostly back to their biological families.

Foster parents have told me about children who come from very frightening situations. They had been subject to things that no one should ever experience, let alone as a two or three year old. Foster parents always have the same priority with every child: love them. It is amazing to see how this love gives birth to something new in a child's life. It isn't always immediately evident, and there are always surprises along the way, but love always introduces new beginnings and possibilities into children's lives.

Teachers know these stories, too, and the stories are particularly dramatic in schools where there most of the students grow up in poverty. A girl grows up in a family of 11. Some of her siblings don't make it to graduation, one of them gets pregnant

along the way, one is struggling with addiction, but she finds her way to a college scholarship, and the day she graduates from high school she seeks out the 5th grade teacher who believed in her. Sometimes that's all it takes - one teacher, one year, but a teacher who embodies faith, hope and love and passes it on to that student who is receptive. It is life-changing and it's how the world changes for the better.

These three things - faith, hope and love - can provide an orientation for our lives when the world around us seems to be spinning out of control. Love grounds us, hope keeps us moving forward, and faith reminds us to look up to all that is mysterious and beautiful. These three things are really all we need if we want to be the people God created us to be.

On this Father's day, I close by sharing with you a short essay about fathers and love. This is written by Brian Doyle, whose work I wholeheartedly commend to you.

“One reason I love my dad is because when I was 16 and got my first job—in a bakery, cleaning the huge pots and vats that were so begrimed and caked with dried dough that I had to, no kidding, climb into them and scrub furiously for hours using some awful chemical that turned my hands and arms yellow—my dad yet again did something so gentle and deft and wise that I still think about it, even now, many years later, partly because I am now a dad and wish to be half as cool a dad as my dad.

I worked for a total of three evenings in that bakery. I walked there after school, through the woods and past the train station, arriving at dusk, just as the baker was leaving. He locked up and turned out the lights and reminded me to shut the back alley door firmly after me when I was done and reminded me not to eat anything although I could take home a bag of day-old rolls. He reminded me to write down my hours and

said, not politely, that the four hours it had taken me the first two nights were too many hours, and that the job ought to take only two hours per evening, and next week he would only pay me for the hours the job ought to take, and then he left, and I climbed into the first pot.

I worked as hard as thoroughly and diligently and meticulously as I could, and again it took me four hours, and I was exhausted, and my hands and arms were so doused with whatever that awful chemical was that I thought I would never get them to be pinkish brownish ever again, and I confess that I nearly wept, after writing down my hours and closing the back alley door firmly behind me and walking home in the dark. I hated the job, *hated* it, but this was my first job ever, and you can't quit after three days, that's just embarrassing, but I hated the work, and I stank all over, and the baker was a grump, and I was so tired I stumbled going up the porch steps at home.

At home my brothers and sister and mother were about their various tasks and vocations, but my dad was waiting for me at the dining room table, where my mom had left a plate of food for me. I ate wearily and he didn't say anything for a while and then he said, "You dislike the work, don't you?"

For a moment I tried to be cool and say cool dismissive manly things, but it didn't work, and I blurted out that I hated it and I stank and I wanted to quit, I wanted to quit so bad I could taste the wanting-to-quit, which tasted like that awful cleaning chemical.

I thought he would be angry. I thought he would be disappointed. I thought he would maybe even sneer or say something terse using the words *lazy* and *work ethic*. But he didn't. He said gently that he understood, and that if I quit that was fine by him,

as long as I then looked diligently for other work; we all need to work, but we do not need to do work we hate, he said. There are many ways to work. You'll see. Find a job that you like. The only thing I would ask is that you quit in person, face to face, and that you stay respectful to that man. He hired you, don't forget, and you owe him gratitude and respect, even as you leave.

This I did, the next day, and true to form the baker didn't take it well, and offered rude remarks, but I didn't care, because I would never have to touch or smell that awful chemical again, or climb into a vat caked with day-old dough; and also I felt some subtle thing that I struggle to find words for, even now. I suppose I felt freed, yes, but I think I also felt something like a wriggle of pride in and respect for my dad, that he was gentle and understanding, and somehow his quiet grace had elevated me, in ways I didn't understand. I suppose I am talking about love. (story published in [The American Scholar](#))

Let us pray. Holy God, we give you thanks for those in our lives who have shown us what matters most. Help us to embody faith, hope and love and share it with your beloved world, as Jesus did. Amen.