

What is love?

A sermon by the Reverend Robert Bruce Edson in Emmanuel Episcopal Church, West Roxbury, Massachusetts, on the Fourth Sunday after the Epiphany, January 31, 2016.

And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love. 1 Corinthians 13:13

I once met a very bright young student who said he had more confidence in science than in religion. He claimed that science had answers and if there is anything that we don't know or understand now, science will have an explanation in the future. I asked if he could explain love. His too simplistic answer was that love is just a chemical reaction within a person or between two people. I only hoped that with more maturity and life experience he might find that love is a mysterious and complex gift that cannot be analyzed under a microscope in a laboratory.

In his Letter to the Corinthians, Saint Paul wrote what is considered to be one of the greatest essays on love. Christian love is far more than our cravings when left to our own devices and desires. Jesus teaches a love that seeks not its own good, but the good of others. Christian love is unselfish and gives priority to others over self. Let's focus on what Saint Paul says about love, point by point.

Love is patient and kind.

The values we have to give to each other in our personal and working relationships, say a great deal about us. In order for us to have loving and fulfilling relationships, we need to practice the fine art of patience and kindness. Being kind, thoughtful and considerate of others is basic to common courtesy.

Love is not jealous or boastful.

Love rejoices in the successes of others. There is no place for jealousy. It only poisons the soul. Those who feel they have to boast about their accomplishments and outdo everyone show a basic insecurity. We don't need to tell others about our achievements, how important we are, or how popular we are. If we boast about anything, we can boast about our love for God and each other and what that means to us.

Love is not arrogant or rude.

When we are comfortable in our own skin, there is no room for arrogance or rudeness. When we are weary and short on patience, when the bank account doesn't balance and the bills are piling up, when children need attention, the laundry is piling up and the dinner is burning, that is when we need to center on mutual respect. Having an arrogant attitude and behaving rudely only damages our confidence and respect.

Love does not insist on its own way.

Christian love means putting the needs of others before our own. This does not mean we allow ourselves to be a doormat. It means that the more we consider the feelings of others, the more our own interests and concerns are considered. We are mutually responsible for each other's feelings and needs. There are no one-way streets in a relationship based on love.

Love is not irritable or resentful.

All of us are given at times to irritation and resentfulness. When we are feeling irritable we need to be very careful what we say. Once a regrettable remark is made, it is difficult to take it back. That's where the quality of forgiveness comes in. Be quick to forgive and slow to accuse. If we do or say something hurtful, it shouldn't be difficult to apologize. Admitting that we are wrong should not affect our self-esteem. It is a sign of strength of character to admit we are wrong. There is no point in trying to place blame on others. We are responsible for our own behavior and mistakes.

We forgive simply because we are forgiven by God. To say that we will never forgive someone denies our own forgiveness. Holding a grudge and feeling resentful is a waste of energy and destroys the spirit within. Forbearance helps us remember that difficult people we encounter may have a burden of which we are unaware.

Love does not rejoice in the wrong, but rejoices in the right

It is one thing to be willing to admit when we are wrong but when we are right it shows a fine command of the English language to keep our mouth shut. Ogden Nash wrote this quatrain about marriage that applies in all our relationships:

To keep your marriage brimming,
With love in the loving cup,
Whenever you're wrong, admit it;
Whenever you're right, shut up.

We don't always have to be right. Respecting the feelings of others is far more important than having to be right. Resolving differences is about respecting each other and realizing that sometimes we have to accept our differences and agree to disagree.

Never laugh at someone, even under the guise of kidding. If you're going to laugh at anyone, laugh at yourself. We take a huge step in maturity when we learn to laugh at ourselves.

This passage from Saint Paul's letter to the Corinthians in the King James Version of the Bible uses the charity rather than love. They are basically one in the same. Love is the motivation for acts of charity. The traditional form of the invitation to confession reads: "Ye who do truly and earnestly repent you of your sins, and are in love and charity with your neighbors, and intend to lead a new life..." Someone once told me that she didn't always feel love and charity for everyone. The challenge is to let our feeling of love and respect for others override our feeling of anger or resentment.

God's grace and love for us is greater, more powerful, and more constant than anything else. Our life is a gift from God. How we live our lives as the people of God is our gift in return. We therefore offer nothing less than our very best.

Thomas Merton wrote how love seeks the good of the one loved. It leaves all the other secondary effects to take care of themselves. Love, therefore, is its own reward.