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1 Corinthians 13

## THE MOST DANGEROUS THING

The most dangerous thing in the world is love. Specifically, the most dangerous thing in the world is Christian love, or what the ancient Greeks called *agape*. In English, we just have one word for *love*. But the ancient Greeks had many words to describe *love*. *Philia* was the word used to mean brotherly or sisterly love--as in the name Philadelphia, which means the "city of brotherly love." *Philia* is the kind of love you have for your children, your best friend, your aunt or uncle. Then there is the word *eros*, which is the kind of love we are getting ready to celebrate this week for Valentine's day. *Eros*, from which we get the word *erotic*, means romantic love.

The third kind of love is called *agape*. *Agape* is a very complex kind of love. *Agape* is the word the Apostle Paul uses in that well-known, well-loved passage from his letter to the Corinthians, the passage we read today. Paul describes what *agape* love looks like: it is patient kind, not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude; it does not insist on its own way, it is not irritable or resentful, *agape* love does not rejoice in wrongdoing, it bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. *Agape* love never ends.

What Paul is describing here is God's kind of love. This is the way God loves us, with a steadfast, unconditional, enduring kind of love. No matter how often we mess up, no matter the gravity of our failures, God loves us with this kind of love. It never ends.

Jesus loved people this way as well. He showed us by what he did and taught us by what he said about this kind of love. And then he called us to follow him in living out agape love in our lives. But this kind of love, this kind of love is the most dangerous thing in the world.

We come to worship in our nice clothes and sit in our pretty sanctuary and sing songs about God's love for us. And it makes us feel good. And we listen to scriptures about our need "to love our neighbor as ourselves." And it all sounds nice, and respectable, and orderly. But love, God's kind of love, agape love is not always nice or respectable or orderly. And too often we in our well-mannered worship services forget just how dangerous this love is.

The writer Annie Dillard writes, "Why do people in church seem like cheerful, brainless tourists on a packaged tour of the Absolute? . . . Does anyone have the foggiest idea what sort of power we blithely invoke? Or, as I suspect, does no one believe a word of it? The churches are children playing on the floor with their chemistry sets, mixing up batches of TNT to kill a Sunday morning." Dillard continues, "It is madness to wear ladies' straw hats and velvet hats to church; we should all be wearing crash helmets. Ushers should issue life preservers and signal flares; they should lash us to our pews. For the sleeping god may wake someday and take offense, or the waking god may draw us to where we can never return."

As Annie Dillard states, we are playing with dangerous elements when we say God loves us and when we speak about loving one another. Crash helmets seem sensible.

How can love be so dangerous? Love seems like the best emotion we could ever hope to feel. But our mistake is thinking that this kind of love is based on an emotion, on the warm feeling we have when we receive a Valentine, on the strong bonds of affection we have for our closest family members or friends. But the Apostle Paul never says that love will feel good. In fact, agape love may sometimes not feel very good at all. And that is because it is not based

upon feelings but upon a commitment toward the welfare of others. And that is why Jesus can tell us to love our enemies and to care about the stranger. We can love the person we can't stand, we can love the person we've never met on the other side of the globe because God's love is not based upon a feeling but upon a deep commitment to the wellbeing of others. Agape love, the kind of love God offers us, the kind of love Jesus displayed, is according to the Apostle Paul and our Christian faith, the most important thing in the world.

And it is also the most dangerous. When people really accept that the Creator of the Universe loves them, them *specifically* as well as their kind of people, then they have a whole new outlook on their sense of worth. And such people just might start demanding that other humans start treating them with the respect they deserve. You can't enslave me. You can't beat me up. You can't demean me. You can't shoot me and ask questions later. You can't incarcerate me without due process. You can't keep me from getting an education. Because God, the Creator of all that is, has declared that I have worth.

And for us to love other people with this kind of agape love is also very dangerous. Why, this kind of love could get you killed. Just ask Jesus. Or Martin Luther King, Jr. Or Gandhi. Or Sister Karen Klemczik. To love with this kind of love could make people hate you. Because standing up for others and demanding justice isn't popular. To declare your love for someone others hate, or for someone others think you shouldn't love, will stir up a whole lot of trouble. Gays and lesbians know this, but so do people helping refugees, or advocating for immigrants, or working with inmates. Love brings enemies together and moves people and groups to reconciliation which is often very unpopular with those who have a rigid point of view. Love prompts people to reconsider how they spend their money and how they vote, threatening well established systems of economics and power. Once unleashed, love's power is incredible. It can

change hearts, heal rifts between people, endure great difficulties, offer hope, and make new things possible.

Some people don't think churches have any business being political. But love is always political. Politics has to do with how human beings organize themselves into systems and how they interact with one another. So if Christians don't want to be political, then we have no business talking about love and should make our way out the doors of our churches. Love cares about people and their welfare, works for justice, and strives to bring people together. If you think people who are hungry should have food to eat and a way to feed themselves, you are political. Jesus preached love, cared about outcasts, fed the hungry, healed the sick, and the people of his day saw what he was doing and recognized how politically subversive it was to the status quo. And they killed him. Love is the most dangerous thing in the world.

But so too is the lack of love. The absence of agape love is the most dangerous thing in the world. The absence of love is what leads to almost all human suffering and evil. It is the root of greed. It is the basis of complacency. It is what tightens the human heart to withhold forgiveness. The absence of love is the cause of genocides, and poverty, the pollution of our planet, and the exploitation of human beings. The absence of love divides families, fosters bitterness, encourages selfishness. The big hole that so many people walk around feeling inside themselves, the hole they try to fill up with drugs or alcohol, with spending and buying things, with casual sex and pornography, with awards and achievements, that big hole of emptiness grows wherever there is the absence of love. The absence of love has left its disastrous mark upon human history and upon each of our own lives in one way or another.

But God has not left us with this disastrous set of circumstances. In Jesus, God has shown us and taught us love. It is not an easy love. It is not a simple love. It is not a warm-fuzzy love. But it is a love that will save us, individually and collectively.

The Apostle Paul's words sound like beautiful poetry, but if we truly embraced the love he writes about, we might rightly want to run out the doors of our churches. It should scare us.

First of all, how can we do this? Who among us can love with patience and kindness all the time? Who is never envious? Who is not rude from time to time? What about not being irritable or resentful? Or can any of us really bear all things? It takes constant work to love this way. To take on agape is hard work, and sometimes unpleasant, and often exhausting. Thankfully, we don't have to rely on our own resources. Loving this way is not about reaching down into some well within ourselves over and over again, because we will often come up dry. Rather, the capacity to love this way comes from God. And God gives us resources to help fill the well. Like one another here today. We gather here each week to learn about love and to help one another on that difficult but blessed journey. We turn to the scriptures, the story of God's love, to remind ourselves about the path that offers a more excellent way. And when we fail to love with agape love, we receive grace, forgiveness, and are raised again to new life. We begin again. We will fail, but we remain committed to the path.

Agape love should also scare us because of where it just might lead us if we were to say "yes" to it. It leads us into a life where we will be challenged, where we will be transformed, where we will be confronted with risks--emotional risks and physical risks. And if you are willing to say yes to that daring but blessed journey, well then, you best remember to wear your crash helmet.