

Together: We Love
1 Corinthians 13:1-8

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Here is a question for kids and adults alike. How did you learn what love is? Who are the people who have taught you about love - maybe by loving you or maybe by their example in loving others? For many of us, the list would include some family members - maybe our parents or spouse or kids. But, there may also be someone else - an elementary school teacher or small group leader, a coach or youth director, someone at church who has inspired you by how much they give to others or share of themselves. Learning to love takes a lifetime. Whoever these people are for you, these are your saints and this day, All Saints Day, is when we give thanks for those who have shaped and supported us in the journey of faith.

We celebrate All Saints once a year on the first of November or the first Saturday or Sunday after. All Saints has been a Christian holiday since 609 AD when Pope Boniface IV dedicated the Roman Pantheon to Mary, mother of Jesus, and to all of the saints. In the first 300 years of the church, people who followed the teachings of Jesus were often killed by the Roman Empire. So, they were the first saints to be honored on this day.

Over time, the meaning of All Saints changed, and it became a day to remember anyone who had died in the previous year. That is why, every year, we read the names of people in our congregation who have passed away and invite their families to join us for worship. We give thanks for their lives and all they have given us.

But saints aren't only people who have passed away. A saint is anyone who teaches what it means to follow Jesus - what it means to live in love. Last week, we started our annual stewardship sermon series using the theme "Together". The idea is that we as a church can do so much more together than any of us can do alone and that everything on the Christian journey is easier to do in community than on our own. We started the series with "Together: We Grow" and today, we'll continue with "Together: We Love".

The scripture passage I chose for today is perhaps the most well-known scripture passage of any in the New Testament. Used often for weddings and memorial services, it comes from Paul's first letter to the church he had started in Corinth a few years before. After Paul left Corinth, the church started running into trouble. Those Corinthians were a feisty bunch, and it wasn't long after Paul's departure that they began to argue about all sorts of things. So, Paul writes this letter to answer their questions and to remind them that, despite their differences, what binds them to each other is love. No gift they have received from God is greater than the gift of love.

What's interesting about this passage is that Paul is very careful to spell out both what love is and what it isn't. Love is patient and kind. Love protects and trusts the beloved, hopes for all that is good for them, and perseveres through challenges and conflict. Love is not boastful or envious or self-seeking. If you love another, you do not speak badly of them or keep a record of the ways they have wronged you. You don't hold a grudge or nurture resentments because these things just feed your anger, making you short-tempered and quick to judge.

In essence these words from Paul to the Corinthians are like an instruction guide on how to follow Jesus' love commandment - that we love each other as he loves us. The people whose lives we give thanks for today did their best to embody that love both within the church and out in the world. We are the benefactors of the foundation of love they built at First United Methodist Church of Ann Arbor.

Yet, what it means to love each other in our church family is evolving and continues to be shaped by the changing circumstances in which we live. Traditionally, a church family cares for each other through acts of love like visiting each other in the hospital or in nursing homes, offering to bring meals or give a ride to someone who is ill, providing comfort and a ministry of presence to those who are grieving, talking together for mutual support and challenge. Thanks to our amazing Minister of Congregation Care, Amy Kennedy, we do a great job with this kind of ministry to each other. Amy not only cares for the congregation herself, she also works to create opportunities for us to care for each other. She coordinates the efforts of our very dedicated Visitation team, she restarted Stephen Ministry in our church, and as the pandemic started, she was part of a staff team that began our Doorstep Disciples ministry in which congregation members have visited people who are alone or unable to get out and taken them news from the church.

Of course, there are many other ways we care for each other, as well. Anyone who belongs to a small group knows that they are a great source of support and sharing. We've also been delivering Communion elements to people at home. Many of us write cards, send flowers, offer a ride, reach out with a phone call or email.

We are truly a loving community. And as we look to the future, I think we are going to see new ways in which we can care for each other. We know that the rate of depression in the U.S. skyrocketed with the onset of the Covid pandemic jumping from 8.5% before the pandemic to 27.8% in the first half of 2020. New research from the Boston University School of Public Health shows that the trend worsened early in 2021 with an estimated 1 in 3 adults suffering from depression. While some anticipate those numbers will go down as more people, and particularly children, are vaccinated, others believe the impact of Covid fatigue will keep them high.

So, one question as we look to the future is how can we care for those in our church family who struggle with depression or anxiety or other mental health challenges? How do we create safe spaces for them? Similarly, as we begin to do more in-person activities, how will we help those who are not ready or able to leave their homes feel connected?

As I mentioned before, the saints who have gone before us not only built a church community here at FUMC that cares for each other but also one that cares for those outside our walls. Our church has a long history of loving our neighbor whether that neighbor sleeps on the ground outside the west entry or attends the secondary school we built in Kenya. We have a plethora of ministries through which we share our love with others - Love Thy Neighbor, House by the Side of the Road, Alpha House, the Christmas giving tree, Hope Clinic, Community Action Network, the CROP walk, Mind the Gap, the list is wonderfully long! Plus, there are those projects we work on in Costa Rica and Kenya as well as the mission trips our youth take domestically and internationally. Now, we have just begun a new ministry in providing space at Green Wood for La Escuelita, an afterschool program for immigrant kids.

All of this work that we do we are able to do because we work together! All of this love we offer is compounded because we offer it together! And as we look to the future, just as we see needs changing in how we care for each other here at church, we will continue to see needs changing in how we care for our neighbors.

We know we live in a painfully divided country and we worship in a painfully divided denomination. How can we both express our love for others through seeking justice and, at the same time, be advocates for peace and healing? How can we be people who embody God's love and, rather than focusing on our differences, demonstrate through our words and actions what it means to seek the common good?

As we seek to be a more diverse and inclusive community, how will we make space to hear the stories of people whose lives, families, joys and sorrows are very different from our own? And how will we communicate that this is a safe space for all?

In this time of great change, we have so many opportunities to build on the foundation of love poured out by all the saints who have gone before us. To reach each other where we are with love and compassion. To reach into our community with love and acceptance. To build a future church in which the love of God grows and out of which the love of God flows.

May it be so. Amen.