

Love is the Highest Gift – Chapter 2 – Rev. Rebecca Trefz

"If I have the gift of prophecy
and I know all the mysteries and everything else,
and if I have such complete faith that I can move mountains,
but I don't have love, I'm nothing.
Now we see a reflection in a mirror,
then we will see face-to-face.
Now I know partially,
but then I will know completely in the same way
that I have been completely known.
Now, faith, hope and love remain these three things,
and the greatest of these is love."

1 Corinthians 13:1-2, 12-13 (CEB)

I'm Reverend Rebecca Trefz, director of Connectional Ministries and Southeast District Superintendent for the Dakotas Conference of The United Methodist Church. This week as we continue our Lenten journey through our book, *Multiplying Love*, author Paul Chilcote takes us to another essential of a renewed United Methodist Church... the gift that is at the core of this text and is meant to be at the core of being a follower of Jesus, and that is the gift of love.

Now, I'll admit it can be easy to become cynical or dismissive when we talk about this word "love." It can get thrown around as a catch-all for positive emotions or, a reason not to disagree with or hurt someone's feelings. Or in the case of tough love or speaking the truth in love, it can become a justifying disclaimer for harsh words or hurtful actions. The nebulous nature of this word love can make it difficult to get our arms around it as a litmus test for faith and discipleship.

But as we have come through a deeply painful season within our family of faith, as we look ahead to another General Conference and rebuilding a denomination in a post-Christian world, and as the new cycle reminds us that we have entered an election year with deepening divides in our country, perhaps love and its ability to transform us and multiply through us is the gift we need to reclaim and recommit to even more. We know it as a gift that has been and will be tested. It's been tested by divisions in our churches and communities over the past few years and the grief of lost relationships and the way things used to be.

It's been tested by vitriol in the public square and in private conversations that tell us to "fear the other"—And it's been tested by the vulnerability we feel as we live in a time of great uncertainty.

And as humans, when we feel hurt or scared or vulnerable, we know we don't always pass the test of love, of loving God and certainly not of loving our neighbor.

But in this season of Lent, this season of self-reflection and repentance, I believe Chilcote's reminder of this gift, a gift that is meant to form and guide us, is a timely invitation and challenge. It's an invitation to open ourselves to the power of the Holy Spirit, to cultivate this love in and through us, and it's a challenge for us to wrestle with what that will mean and look like in our lives.

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Now, there are obviously a lot of scriptures we could dig into to understand this gift of love and what it's meant to look like in our lives and our faith, but I, I think Chilcote gives us a great place to start at the beginning of chapter two when he reads and writes about these phrases from the first, from 1 Corinthians, chapter 13– the love chapter. This passage is a familiar one to many as we've likely heard at read at weddings, and yet it isn't just meant to be for those who are saying I do, but rather for all of us who will say, I will. "I will follow Jesus and I will seek to be like him."

In this chapter in 1 Corinthians, Paul paints a picture of what this gift, this posture, of love should look like. Love should look like being patient, kind, and not easily angered.

Love should look like not envying what others have or being boastful or proud about what I have.

Love should honor others as fellow image bearers.

Love should not simply be about "what's in it for me" or hold onto grudges when things don't go my way.

Love should seek righteousness and justice, seek things that restore right relationship with God and with people.

Now, all of that sounds great, but if love is meant to be more than just a good set of beliefs or ideals or a warm, fuzzy feeling, then we have to ask ourselves honestly if we are putting that kind of love into practice, and that can be a hard mirror to hold up to ourselves. How are we at showing patience to someone who's really frustrating us... repeatedly? How are we at "not being easily angered or keeping a record of wrongs" with someone who has offended us, or worse, betrayed or wounded us? Are we able to "not be envious or boastful or jealous or rude" with people who seem to get more than more than we do, even though they don't deserve it?

I don't know about you, but even on my best days, it can be difficult to honestly answer "yes" to these questions. But therein lies the transforming power of love– love poured out through the power of the Holy Spirit and modeled in a very tangible way in the person of Jesus Christ who invited us to follow his example. Jesus constantly modeled this kind of humble, selfless, sacrificial love throughout his life, but maybe most powerfully in the Upper Room when he got down on his knees in humble service, not because of what was in it for him or because they deserved it, but because he knew how transforming this experience of love would be for them.

And he was able to do it because he was so anchored in the Father's love, so secure in God's care and provision that he could have the strength to be humble, to show a counter-cultural kind of love, even if it wasn't reciprocated. Because if you can remember, Jesus was able to wash Judas' feet too. We know the Devil had gotten ahold of Judas' heart and whether that was through fear or pride or arrogance, at that point, Judas couldn't love or serve Jesus, but Jesus didn't let Judas' heart and actions determine HIS character and behavior.

This week's chapter reminds us that we can believe all the right things about God and even about love, but if it doesn't change our character and our actions toward others, if we don't look any different than the world around us, especially in how we treat those who we disagree with, or who hurt us, then we're simply

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a noisy gong or a clanging symbol. But with the power of the Holy Spirit living in us– that same power that raised Jesus from the dead, we too are able to love like Jesus did. Patiently, selflessly, and sacrificially. We're able to reflect that image of Jesus Christ that is in us, not just reflect the actions and attitudes of people around us.

In the chapter, Chilcote reminds us that for Charles Wesley, theology– how we understand God– "was meant to transform our dispositions and desires, enabling us to take on the mind of Christ and the fruit of the Spirit." As we journey through Lent and toward the cross and the empty tomb, the greatest image of multiplying love the world has ever known. May we do so with hearts that are humble and open to the transforming work of the Spirit.

May we experience that gentle conviction and course correction in the places where love is lacking. And may we look expectantly for the ways in which we get to be a partner in God's work of multiplying love that we might get a glimpse of the Kingdom on Earth as it is in Heaven.