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Sermon 14 February 2021

Giving 2: Giving Love (1 Corinthians 13)

- Good morning church—it is so good to have you with us this morning and we welcome you to our service –we appreciate your taking the time and making the effort to be with us today—I believe God has something to say to you today that will lift you up and encourage you in the days to come
- Today is, of course Valentine’s Day, or more correctly, St. Valentine’s Day. Today is a day when, here in the UK alone, about  $\frac{3}{4}$  of us—that’s around 40 million people—will celebrate in some way, spending about £30 per person, for a total outlay of right at a billion pounds—that’s a billion with a b. Of course, that means that about one fourth of us won’t be celebrating. Some folks would rather not think about Valentine’s Day because they don’t have that special someone in their lives—perhaps they never have, or they’ve loved and lost—or maybe they just can’t be bothered with such foolishness.
- But most of us can, and do, celebrate in some way. We give cards, or buy some sort of gift, chocolates or flowers, maybe we plan a special date night, maybe dinner and a movie—that’s dinner in the kitchen and a movie in the living room for most of us these days. Maybe we write a poem that starts out with the lines “roses are red, violets are blue . . .”
- If you ask most anyone what we’re celebrating, they’ll tell you that the simple answer is “love.” By this of course they mean “romantic love,” the affection between two people who are “in love.” St Valentine’s Day is a day for celebrating and

appreciating girlfriends and boyfriends and husbands and wives—those people we are connected to in a very special way—in a way that is unlike the way that we are connected to other people—it is a day when we celebrate those relationships and that kind of love.

- If you've got someone in your life like that, today is a day to be especially thankful to God for them, and to make sure that they know how much you love and appreciate them, and to tell them that you are thankful for them—I know I certainly am. I don't know what I'd do without my valentine—so I'll make sure to give her something that communicates that love—dinner or a poem or at **least** a card.
- It may be that the tradition of sending Valentine's Day cards to our "Valentines" has its origins in a letter that St Valentine of Rome sent to his jailer's daughter before he was executed in the year 269—a letter that he allegedly signed "your Valentine," and it may be that we associate St Valentine with romantic love because he performed marriages for Christian soldiers who had been forbidden to marry
- But whatever the historical connections between Saint Valentine of Rome and what we celebrate on February 14th, it is certainly true that behind what is really a very secularised holiday—a holiday that retains very little if any religious connotations, there is the story of a martyred saint—a follower of Jesus who sacrificed his life for the gospel
- Even though Valentine's Day has become a celebration of romantic love—its very name is a reminder of a martyr-- St. Valentine of Rome—and a reminder of countless other martyrs who gave the last full measure of their faith because they were driven by a very different kind of love.
- So Happy St. Valentine's Day!

- We are continuing our four-week sermon series called a Generous Life—The Beauty in Giving, today—and in this series we are talking about what it means to live a generous life—a life that is characterised by giving—by a willingness to share the blessings that God has provided to each of us with others, to make what we have available for the building of the Kingdom of God—to offer ourselves to God and His purposes.
- And as we described last week, there are many things that we can give when we are following God’s example, when we are seeking to have the same mind as Christ—when we live a generous life—the most obvious one of course is that we can give of our resources—we can give financial support to the work of the Kingdom
- But as we said last week that’s only one way to give—that’s only one thing that we can give—and during this sermon series we are thinking about some other ways to give, some other things we can give
- Last week we started our series with a kind of giving that we said was essential, is fundamental to living a generous life
- And that is giving thanks.
- And we considered that before we can even begin to exemplify a generous life, we need to exemplify an attitude of gratitude—an understanding that God’s provision to us—to all of us—has not been and will not be miserly or tight-fisted but bountiful, even extravagant
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- And when we realise that God provides for us, that God meets our needs no matter what our situation is, then we can be thankful in every circumstance—and we can be

not only thankful but generous, because we have a perspective of abundance and not of scarcity

- This is what the Apostle Paul was reminding the church at Thessalonica--and us—about last week—we were reminded that giving thanks was a prerequisite to living a generous life
- But while giving thanks is a **pre-requisite** to living a generous life, the giving that we are going to be learning about today is the *sine qua non* of a generous life—that element, that component that a truly generous life, a holy, sanctified life marked by compassion and emptying ourselves out for others is impossible without
- You may remember that we talked about this same *sine qua non*—this “without which nothing”—in a sermon by that title way back in October of 2019
- In that sermon we were looking, as we are again today, at Paul’s first epistle to the church at Corinth, and that *sine qua non* was love
- And so today we’re considering a second kind of giving, and that is giving love.
- Now we said last week that Paul’s letter to the church at Thessalonica wasn’t really the kind of corrective letter that he had written to other churches—it was primarily a letter of encouragement—a letter that said in general “good job—keep doing what you’re doing!”
- But Paul’s first letter to the church at Corinth, a city in the southern part of Greece—Thessalonica was in the northern part—is not that kind of letter—it is the corrective kind--because there are some problems in Corinth that Paul needs to address—some issues that need to be
- rectified—like divisions among the believers—now that was an issue to some degree in Thessalonica as well, but the folks in Corinth seemed to have a much bigger

problem with it—and there was also some immorality affecting the church in Corinth and, well, Paul needed to make things clear for them that there were some things that they were doing that they needed to stop doing—and some ways that they were thinking about things that needed to be reconsidered—and so Paul has some admonishments for the folks at Corinth—some reprimands for them—in many ways Paul’s first letter to the church at Corinth is what we in the South call a “come to Jesus meeting”

- And one of the things that the church at Corinth needs to “come to Jesus” about is their interest—you might even say their obsession—with gifts—spiritual gifts.
- Paul spends all of Chapter 12 of 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians making sure that the followers of Jesus in Corinth are “not uninformed” about spiritual gifts
- And folks at Corinth seem to be overly interested in one particular gift, and that is the gift of tongues—and it may be that they’re confused about what this gift looks like—or more accurately what it sounds like—and so Paul has to tell them right off the bat that no one who is speaking through the power of the Holy Spirit is ever going to say anything that is antithetical to the truth of the gospel—the Holy Spirit is not going to disagree with itself—
- But not only does there seem to be some problem with the practice of spiritual gifts like tongues, there seems to be among the Corinthian Christians a problem with their motivation to receive spiritual gifts—because Paul has to remind the church that the whole point of spiritual gifts is that they are manifested “for the common good”—they are not ways to simply demonstrate how “gifted” a person is, ways to draw attention to oneself, but they are to be used for the edification of others—and

so Paul makes a point later in chapter 14 about the way that the gift of tongues only builds up the one who speaks when it happens without the gift of interpretation—

- Imagine if I were to preach this sermon in French or Russian or Klingon—you might be very impressed but unless you knew how to interpret what I was saying, the experience would not be edifying to you—I'd just be making noise and making a spectacle of myself from your perspective—and the gifts of the Spirit are for more than that—they are to be given out—used to build up others as well as ourselves
- But the Corinthian Christians are overly concerned with GETTING spiritual gifts, and Paul says to them, “you’re so interested in what gift you’re gonna GET, when you should be interested in how you’re going to GIVE what you’ve been given”—Paul tells them that the gifts of the Spirit are not given to you so that you can show off or think that you’re more “gifted” than someone else—no, Paul says we’re all one body and every part is important and all the different gifts are from the same Holy Spirit
- But the Corinthian Christians have got it into their heads that the gift of tongues is somehow “better” than other gifts, and Paul does something interesting to counter that idea—he doesn’t say “all the gifts are equal” or “no gift is better than any other,” but he does set out a kind of hierarchy of gifts—and he puts the gift of tongues dead last, before telling them either to “strive for the greater gifts” OR telling them “but you strive for the greater gifts”—and then he pulls the rug out from under them by saying that there’s an even better way to think about gifts and the way they are lived out, the way they are manifested.
- Here’s what Paul writes at the end of Chapter 12:
- 27 Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it. 28 And God has appointed in the church first apostles, second prophets, third teachers; then deeds

of power, then gifts of healing, forms of assistance, forms of leadership, various kinds of tongues. 29 Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Are all teachers? Do all work miracles? 30 Do all possess gifts of healing? Do all speak in tongues? Do all interpret? 31 But strive for the greater gifts—or that sentence may be better translated “but you strive for the greater gifts.” You think you can earn, you can strive for, a free gift somehow-- But here comes the punchline: And I will show you a still more excellent way.

- And that more excellent way is what Paul is talking about in chapter 13—and it’s all about love.
- Some passages of scripture are so often referenced and become so familiar to us that, even among the general public, they acquire a name—a label that we use when we talk about them—we do that with the Sermon on the Mount, and the kenosis hymn, we can use those names instead of saying Matthew 5, 6 and 7 or Philippians 2: 5-11—and 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians 13 is like that too—we call it “the love chapter.”
- And the love chapter—or part of it, anyway, usually verses 4-7—is sometimes read at weddings, or it’s put on greeting cards or inspirational posters, or the whole chapter is used as the text for the sermon on Valentine’s Day
- And because in English, we use the same word, “love” to refer to the romantic love that we celebrate on Valentine’s Day and the love that Paul is talking about here in the love chapter, it’s easy to forget that the word “love” has a wide range of meanings
- People say they “love” all kinds of things—we might say “I love chocolate” and “I love my country” and “I love my parents” and “I love my friends” and “I love my wife” and “I love Jesus,” but we are not talking about the same kind of love in every

one of those instances—the love we have for chocolate is not the same love we have for our parents, and the love we have for our parents is not the love we have for our wives or husbands, and our love for Jesus is different from all of them

- And so it's important to remember that there were 4 Greek words that the Corinthians would have known that can be translated into English as "LOVE"—CS Lewis wrote a book called "The Four Loves" about these
- They are:
- Eros: that's romantic love-- the love of sexual attraction or erotic desire; It's what the goddesses Aphrodite and Venus are associated with and what we celebrate on Valentine's Day-- sometimes though, it is used for general desires, things that "I want"—like what we mean when we say "I love chocolate" -- That's not what Paul is talking about in the love chapter
- Next, storge is family love—the love shared between those who are familiar, who are related to one another. When we say we love our parents, we're talking about storge—And that's not what Paul is talking about in the love chapter
- Thirdly, Philia is the love of true friendship, the love you would bear for those who share in common groups and activities—the love that says "you are my brother." Philia is what we're talking about when we say "I love my friends" --- Philia is the reason Philadelphia is called the city of brotherly love—because that's literally what it means, but That's not what Paul is talking about in the love chapter—
- Now these three so far are what you might call "natural" loves—because they are the kinds of love that anyone CAN do—within our human capacities we are capable of these three natural loves—but these natural loves that humans are ABLE to show can be contrasted with DIVINE love—the kind of love that is a GIFT from God, that

love that we as humans are not, in our humanity, in our mere human-ness, able to achieve, and that love is

- Agape
- Agape is Godly love—it's the love God demonstrates in the incarnation, in emptying himself out for the world in the crucifixion—it's the self-sacrificial love we are called to--the love of true charity (and it's translated as charity in the King James Version), the love of stranger, that drives you to give to the poor, support the homeless, visit the imprisoned, feed the hungry, and care for creation—and without it, Paul says, these activities profit us nothing—they're good works, but nothing **more** than works
- We just did a whole sermon series based on the greatest commandments, and we saw that there are four commands there—love the Lord with all your heart and soul, all your mind, all your strength, and Love your neighbour as yourself—and even though there are four separate commands there, there is only one verb—that verb is AGAPE
- In fact, as my friend Mitchel Modine shared with me recently--agape and its derivatives occur 143 times in the Greek New Testament. That's a little trivia that you can remember because "143" is an abbreviation that young people use when they send texts on their phones—it's shorthand for "I love you" which has one letter, then four letters, then three letters. 143.
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- Now, agape is the love that makes it possible for Paul to say of the spiritual gifts in Chapter 12 verse 7 that they are FOR THE COMMON GOOD.
- And so in chapter 13, when Paul shows the church at Corinth a “more excellent way” it is not surprising that he begins with the Corinthians' favourite gift—the gift of

tongues. He writes: If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have agape, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal.

- That is, I can engage in this activity, but without the divine gift of agape that empowers it and makes it efficacious and edifying for others, I am simply making a noisy spectacle of myself—simply drawing attention to my performance.
- But Paul goes further and speaks of other gifts he’s referenced in Chapter 12: And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have agape, I am nothing.
- If I give away all my possessions, and if I hand over my body so that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing.
- That is, the sine qua non of all of these activities, that without which they are worthless and meaningless, is agape. Because as Paul tells us in verse 8, these gifts—tongues and prophecy and knowledge and even sacrifice, these gifts are finite and partial—they will come to an end—but agape, that infinite overflowing and self-sacrificing love of the divine is endless
- And so agape is a love unlike those natural loves, it is a divine, supernatural gift that is to be given through various means—tongues, prophecy, knowledge, sacrifice--and without it the means are meaning-less—as Charles Wesley wrote, agape is that “love divine, all loves excelling,” embodied in the person of Jesus Christ and the work of his
- crucifixion and resurrection, whose example we are to follow, whose mind we share, being dead to sin but alive in Him, whose Spirit fills us and raises us up to give ourselves to the work of the Kingdom

- It is a paradoxical and ironic thing to speak of “having” agape—because agape is that “giving love” that is freely given to us by God, it is exemplified in the self-emptying of Jesus, and we “have” *agape* only inasmuch as we reflect that immense and free “giving love” by giving ourselves to the Kingdom, by “giving love” to others, and in turn the “giving love” of the body of believers comes back to us as well
- And I wondered for a little while this past week about how to express that paradox, that irony—the title of this sermon is “giving love” but in verses 1 through 3 of our scripture today Paul speaks about “having” love—having agape. And the truth of the matter is that “having” agape and “giving” agape are inseparable—like the two parts of the greatest commandment, if you love the Lord with all your heart, soul, mind and strength, you will also love your neighbour as yourself—if you have agape toward God, you will have agape toward others, and the way you “have” agape is by giving yourself to God and giving of yourself to others
- As I wondered how best to express that idea—it occurred to me to look at the original Greek that Paul uses when he talks about “having” agape—in verses 1 through 3. And in those verse when Paul uses the phrase that is translated as “have love,” love is obviously “agape,” but the word that is translated as “have” is *echó*.
- And *echó* does mean to have or to possess in Greek, but in English the idea that we have *agape* in the same way that we echo *agape* is very useful in understanding how agape works—because agape is the gift of love that God speaks forth toward us, the gift of infinite love that was spoken through the Word that became flesh, and we echo back that agape to God, but not only to God, we proclaim the sound of that love to others through our words and actions-- this is our story, this is our song-- and that love echoes back to us, rising and resounding and reverberating—so that when

we have and give agape we do not **gain nothing**, nor are we simply a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal, but we are part of a mighty choir of voices both earthly and divine, proclaiming the love of God, how rich and pure, how measureless and strong—it shall forever more endure, the **saints'** and angels' song—

- Let's lift our voices together this morning as Brannon and Gloria Hancock lead us in this beautiful hymn