

UN-FAILING LOVE

FEBRUARY 16, 2020 SERMON

Scripture: If I speak in the tongues of men or of angels, but do not have love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal. If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have a faith that can move mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. If I give all I possess to the poor and give over my body to hardship that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing.

Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It does not dishonor others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres.

Love never fails. But where there are prophecies, they will cease; where there are tongues, they will be stilled; where there is knowledge, it will pass away. For we know in part and we prophesy in part, but when completeness comes, what is in part disappears. When I was a child, I talked like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I put the ways of childhood behind me. For now we see only a reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in

part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known.

And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love.

There are people in the world I simply do not understand. Can I get an Amen? There are kinds of people in the world I cannot understand. Whole groups of them. I don't get where they're coming from. I don't get why they are the way they are, why they think the way they think. I don't get it. I don't get them. I don't know them, and when I get around them, I get uncomfortable.

About four years ago, there was a group of people like that. I didn't get their deal. People would tell me they didn't get their deal, and I was quick to pipe up that I didn't get it either. I didn't know any of those people. I wasn't hateful to them. I wasn't anything except uncomfortable.

One day, one of the people I didn't understand, after asking my permission, picked up Jay at a public event. And Jay, little as he was, immediately responded to this person with giggles, smiles, and delight. Something in me broke. All of this understanding rushed

through me. It was like I could feel my brain making new connections to try to make sense of it all. Compassion flooded me. I stood there, watching my child happy in the arms of a type of person I had never understood, I had never tried to understand, but a person. A full human being. While this full human being interacted with Jay, I stood in place and repented of every time I had ever said, "I don't understand them either." When Jay and I left, I thought to myself, "I have had a failure of love."

I've been thinking about this concept, trying to put it on my preaching schedule, for the last four years: failure of love. To me, this was when we needed to understand someone in order to love them, when we needed to know and like one of a kind of person to feel love for all of them. For four years, I've been recognizing failures of love in our history as human beings and in our present.

I thought a lot about divorce with this idea. As human beings, as Americans, we all have feelings about divorce. And with those feelings about divorce once came strong feelings about divorced people. Over time, as we got to the point when everybody knew and loved somebody who was divorced, we got over feeling like we should treat people differently because they're divorced, and divorced people became just people. We got to keep our opinions on divorce, but we also realized, through our personal relationships, that these people we knew were the same people we'd always known, only now they were hurting. So maybe — well now we understand. So now we can love.

And I've been calling that, in my mind and in conversations, a failure of love. I've had quite a few arguments about this with people, because I think of this passage from 1 Corinthians that you've probably heard at lots of weddings: *Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It does not dishonor others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres.* And I thought, if I'm not able to offer that to people I don't understand, my love is failing.

There is this distinctly Methodist idea. We're pretty open-ended on a lot of beliefs, but we do have a couple of zingers that set us apart as Wesleyan. This distinctly Methodist idea is that we can be perfected in love in this lifetime. That we can actually, by following the example of Jesus, get to a point in which our love for others is perfect and complete.

I think of Jesus' love, how he treated the people he encountered. Jesus knew everything about people. We know that from the story of the woman at the well. He told her all about herself. She was a completely different kind of person from Jesus — she was even a Samaritan, someone a 1st century Jewish person would not talk to or ask for a drink. But Jesus did. He didn't say "I understand your life choices and the accident of your birth as a Samaritan." He didn't get her to explain herself and then decide she was okay. He didn't get to know her and then reason out, "Well maybe ALL Samaritans aren't so bad." He knew she was a Samaritan. He knew she'd been married several times. He knew she was a woman. He treated her like a full human being and showed her so much love that she ran off to tell other people the great thing she'd found in Jesus Christ at the well.

But really, we don't have to go any farther than the mirror to understand that Jesus' love is not tied to His understanding of us as the kinds of people we are. We know from scripture, from tradition, from experience that "Yes, Jesus loves me." We hear it. We sing it. We feel it. We know it. Jesus loves us. And while he was a 1st century Middle Eastern Jewish person, we are 21st century American people. We are so far from His human experience, yet we know Jesus loves us. There is no indication in scripture that He needs to get to know one of us personally before He loves all people like us.

So why, I wondered, why does our love sometimes fail? Why do we, as Christians, need to get to know someone who is whatever the thing is we're worried about, before we love them? How do we, as Methodists, get perfected in love, if our love sometimes fails? I thought mine had, and I've argued with people about preaching this. "It's not a

failure of love," they said. "It's just the way people are." And I was like, "But Jesus wasn't that way. Jesus loved before He met. Jesus never had to be convinced of the humanity of someone that's different from Him, but we sometimes do."

A few months ago, I walked past a Sunday School class and heard someone quote one of my sermons: "It'll all be okay in the end. If it's not okay, it's not the end."

When I read today's scripture, to attempt to put together this sermon I've been thinking about for four years — as I read it and reread it to prepare to preach about how we fail at love, something popped out. The next verse after that beautiful passage I just read about what love is, the very next passage is this — *Love never fails*.

When that sentence popped out at me, all of this understanding rushed through me. It was like I could feel my brain making new connections to try make sense of it all. Compassion flooded me. It's not that our love fails. *Love never fails*. These aren't failures of our love. These are the people we've forgotten we're called to love. Whoever they are. Whoever we are.

I had it wrong. It's not a failure of love when we don't love people we don't understand. It's a **failure to love**. It's not that our love fails. It's that we don't offer automatically offer love when faced with the idea people we don't understand. Love never fails. If it fails, it's not love.

Paul says, in 1 Corinthians 13, *For now we see only a reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known.*

We don't get to understand everyone in this life. But we're Methodists. We believe we are called to love and that we can get it perfectly in this life. There will always be people, and kinds of people, we don't know or understand. Jesus did not walk the earth seeking greater understanding of human beings. He walked the earth showing love to all human beings. Pharisees. Sadducees. Samaritans. Romans. The men beside Him on the other crosses. His disciples who never seemed to understand Him. Hungry crowds. Women. Lepers. The people of His day and the people of our day and the

people of every day in between. Jesus doesn't see anyone as "those people." Jesus doesn't have to figure out if we're fully human beforehand. Jesus LOVES us. Jesus LOVES people. And love never fails.

Jesus calls us, not to judge, not to misunderstand, not even to understand, but to LOVE. Before we understand. There are no "those people" to Methodists on the road to being perfected in love. We think we can get this. Perfectly. It's weird. And I love it. And I want it for me and for you and for our world. Remember: Love never fails. If it fails, it's not love. Amen.