

“Love Is the Answer”

Those of us who were around in the 60s and 70s remember hearing songs that proclaimed the answer to all the world’s problems. The radio was full of songs like “What the World Needs Now Is Love,” “Love Is the Answer,” and “All You Need is Love” to name just a few. Love was said to be the cure for the world’s ills of war, hate, jealousy, injustice, imperialism, communism, racism, greed, and so much more. The problem is that there were so many other songs that proclaimed the virtues and pitfalls of romantic love, “This Guy’s in Love,” “For Lovin’ Me,” and “Love, Love Me Do,” for example.

We have only one word in English to describe the ranges of love from the love of neighbor, to Platonic love, to infatuation (“Puppy Love”), to love of child and family, to romantic love, marital love, to our deep enjoyment of chocolate, a movie, a book, etc. The word might be able to handle all of these aspects of what we call love, but we humans do not seem to be able to keep them straight.

One of the most prominent examples is how we have grown accustomed to using First Corinthians chapter thirteen as a wedding reading. I cannot blame couples for using the passage. The Book of Common Prayer offers it as an option. The passage itself is beautiful. Unfortunately, because of this usage and our limited ability to distinguish between different kinds of love this passage seems to have lost much of the power that St. Paul intended.

A clue might be in reading the passage in the King James translation. In that version the word love is not used once. In its place we find the word charity. While being charitable may be an aspect of one’s love for humanity I bet it would not be in the top five or ten aspects of love that we would name unprompted. How is it then that the King James Version, a translation that is generally quite good, come to use the word charity instead of love in this passage from Corinthians.

We find the answer not so much in the original Greek text but in the Latin text attributed to St. Jerome circa 382. In Greek the word Paul used was *agape*.¹ Jerome translated *agape* into Latin as *caritas*.² The dictionary defines *caritas* as “Christian love of humankind; charity.”³ The modern understanding of charity has narrowed to “the voluntary giving of help, typically in the form of money, to those in need”⁴ or an organization that collects donations to help those in need. The same dictionary indicates “Christian love” can be a definition of charity, but it is an archaic usage.

This is more than an intellectual exercise. By looking at these words—*agape*, *caritas*, charity and love—we can break free of our own limited

¹ Bible Hub Interlinear Bible https://biblehub.com/interlinear/1_corinthians/13.htm

² Sacred Texts Vulgate translation <https://www.sacred-texts.com/bib/vul/co1013.htm>

³ Google Dictionary

⁴ Ibid

understanding of St. Paul's message in First Corinthians. We have the opportunity to realize that the love he is writing about is not just between a married couple. He is commending to the church in Corinth a way of being in all aspects of life and with all people. It is a way of being that is different from that of Roman society then and our society now.

This becomes clear when we look back at the preceding chapters in the letter. There he castigates the congregation for not treating each other respectfully. He also instructs them in spiritual gifts and how the church is the body of Christ. The last verse of chapter 12 is the setup for what we heard today. Paul wrote, "I will show you a still more excellent way." That is, after instructing them on better behavior and the qualities of spiritual gifts he now has a better way than any of what they are doing.

With all of these clues we know what Paul was up to. He is directing the people of the church in Corinth toward a new way, a more excellent way than the one they grew up with or have gotten used to. He is directing them to live a life of *agape-caritas-love-charity* for others. That is a life that is in imitation of the one Christ modeled for us. Selfless love is the better way, even if it did lead Jesus to the point of death on a cross.⁵

Nothing matters without Christ's love working in us to transform us from beings greedy for power, money, possessions and importance. We may have all the spiritual gifts and have honed them to the finest edge, but without Christ's love in our hearts they are nothing.

In a few minutes the choir will sing "Ubi caritas et amor, Deus ibi est." Where charity and love are, there also is God. If you want to see Christ's love at work in the world put yourself in proximity to charity and love—the food bank, a blood donor center, a battered women's shelter, disaster relief, jail, crisis counseling, and so forth. In those places where darkness and despair seem so prevalent that is where the light of Christ shines most brightly. Those are the places where *agape, caritas, charity*, and Christ's love for all humanity are at work. That is where "the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness [cannot] overcome it."⁶

⁵ Philippians 2:8

⁶ John 1:5