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First Congregational Church
United Church of Christ
East Hartford, Connecticut

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(Seventh in series, *Christian Wisdom for Life, Ten Easy Verses*)

And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three, but the greatest of these is love.
-I Corinthians 13:13-

(Supporting Text: I Corinthians 13)

The Greatest Gift of All

Throughout history humankind has had many great aspirations. Creative souls of every generation have sat down in some quiet place and dreamed of glory. By their nature, the great quests of life are religious and seekers turn to philosophers and prophets and ask, "What is the best and noblest to which a person a person can strive?" Answers have varied with culture and time. Some said beauty, some reason, some self-denial. Jesus Christ said love, love of God and love of neighbor is the highest aspiration a person can have. *And he (Jesus) said to him, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind." This is the great and foremost commandment. And the second is like unto it, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself."* -Matthew 22:36-39- (quoted from Deuteronomy 6:5)

The apostle Paul compared the value of love in the church with the most respected spiritual abilities of his day and wrote that without love the others are worthless. He says of preaching; the ability to use eloquent words to proclaim the gospel, without love it is only as a noisy gong or clanging bell. Perhaps you have listened to a preacher whose rhetoric was undeniable and yet whose message was flat and uninspired. Or worse, perhaps you were subjected to one who spoke out of the antithesis of love, who rather harangued out of hostility or bitterness or arrogance. The point Paul makes is clear, if the message is delivered without love the preacher might as well be mute for all the good the sermon will do.

Paul then suggests that there might be a very intelligent person who has grasped the knowledge of the universe, who knows everything about everything (maybe you know someone like this), without love that person's life is empty. Paul even says of faith, and the person who has the kind of faith that could move mountains, if that person has no love then he or she still has nothing of value. For the writers of the New Testament as

well as for Jesus, the end of all true faith is love. James put it this way: *Faith, if it has not works (of love), is dead.* -James 2:17-

So as we anticipate the year ahead for First Church, the challenges that are before us and the needs that we have, what might be the gifts and abilities that will be most needed? Will it be most important to have an understanding of church politics and institutional management or perhaps of group dynamics? Will the great need be to understand the United Church of Christ well or the history of New England Congregationalism or the history of First Church? Or will the need be for eloquent persuasive speakers or for brilliant creative worship or programming ideas? Or will the greatest need be for us to have unshakable faith? To any of those suggestions Paul would answer a resounding, no!

The right answer is simple and clear. It is in the memory verse for this morning. The most important thing all of us will need in order for the church to be a vital and effective Christian congregation (as well as to lead successful lives outside the church!), is to be filled with love. Paul describes love for us.

Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never ends. -Corinthians 13:4-8a-

The Bible says that love is a gift, but it is a special kind of gift. Unlike the other gifts in the church that Paul mentions, like teaching and preaching, and healing, and performing miracles, love is a gift which is given to everyone. It is the supreme life power and pleasure and everyone can tap into it. The capacity for it has been implanted deep within the human spirit and can never be completely removed. It fills and flows from everyone who remains connected to the Vine, Jesus Christ. -John 15:5-

Love is the most important gift of all to give and receive. And here may be an emphasis not often enough preserved. Real love, if it is to thrive, must be both given **and** received. We might be reminded here of the episode of Jesus in the Upper Room with the disciples when he wanted to wash their feet. Peter wished to refuse, thinking himself unworthy of such a gift from his Lord. But Jesus replied that unless he washed Peter's feet, Peter could not be Jesus' disciple. (John 13:1-11) Love is a flowing outward and a flowing inward. It soon diminishes if it runs just one way, either way. If we are not able sometimes to take our turn and humbly receive it, then we do not understand it well enough to give it. I have heard it said by some that it is easier for them to extend kindness and help to others than it is for them to receive it for themselves, even when they need it. I count myself as one who has sometimes felt the same way. But unless we allow others to also love us, we may think we are loving them but it will be something else.

Did you ever wonder why toward the end of Paul's little discourse on love he suddenly includes the following line? *When I was a child, I spoke as a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned as a child, when I became an adult I put an end to childish ways. (I Corinthians 13:1)* It really is not an abrupt change of direction. For Paul, after he listed all the other gifts which some in the church considered so important, he concludes with the discussion of love before us. It is as the culmination to everything else, the growing up spiritually and reaching of adulthood. He is telling the Corinthian church that to focus on anything more than on love is to be as a child yet in the faith. It is not to see what is really important. It is to get all out of proportion things which really don't matter nearly as much when all is said and done—as a young person or adolescent might not understand yet what the priorities in life need to be. Paul may have even implied that he at one time shared the ideas of some of the Corinthians about the optimum value of eloquent preaching and miraculous healing, or speaking in strange tongues at the height of spiritual ecstasy, or even faith that believed in could move mountains, that these were the abilities that revealed the strength and depth of faith. But he later came to see that those gifts were of little value unless they were grounded in a loving heart. Sp Paul writes that he put away such childish ideas as a man puts away his naïveté when experience teaches him better.

Focusing on love is mature Christianity. Holy Spirit-filled people know that love is the ultimate goal, the one indispensable gift of true faith, the essence of Christianity, the most valuable gift of all, the most important thing in the world.