

## The Gift of Love

**13** If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. <sup>2</sup>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 love, I am nothing. <sup>3</sup>If I give away all my possessions, and if I hand over my body so that I may boast,<sup>[a]</sup> but do not have love, I gain nothing.

<sup>4</sup>Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant <sup>5</sup>or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; <sup>6</sup>it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. <sup>7</sup>It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

<sup>8</sup>Love never ends. But as for prophecies, they will come to an end; as for tongues, they will cease; as for knowledge, it will come to an end. <sup>9</sup>For we know only in part, and we prophesy only in part; <sup>10</sup>but when the complete comes, the partial will come to an end. <sup>11</sup>When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child; when I became an adult, I put an end to childish ways. <sup>12</sup>For now we see in a mirror, dimly,<sup>[b]</sup> but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known. <sup>13</sup>And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love.

## **The Transforming Love of Friends**

**February 7, 2016**

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**1 Corinthians 13:1-13; John 15: 12-13**

When Chuck and I lived in Tennessee, we lived across the street from our best friends, Brandon and Christy. We didn't plan it that way. New neighbors bought the house across from us on Willow Lane six months after we moved in. One warm evening in June, they set up a slip and slide in their sloping front yard. We hadn't met them yet, but Chuck and Cade were home watching the plastic go down and the sprinkler go up. It didn't take them long to ask, "Can we play too?" So when I drove home from a church meeting that evening, I saw both of them with that family's Dad and kids covered in grass and mud in the middle of our cul-de-sac. It is a beautiful thing to "catch" people in the act of playing together.

From the days of the first slip and slide to instituting regular cul-de-sac cook outs, and from setting up trips to the local amusement park to eventually celebrating holidays and taking family vacations together, we became best friends. We complained about various school issues while waiting on the bus. We laughed until we cried playing homemade games of Pictionary. We spent hours playing cards or throwing cornhole while the kids played in the yard. We comforted each other through difficult job situations, and we supported each other through having babies that needed special care – Ryleigh was born prematurely, and their youngest, Clementine was born with spina bifida. We've talked the police out of citing us for setting off fireworks on the Fourth of July, and again on New Year's Eve. And then, just a few years ago, Christy and I cried buckets of tears in her living room before we moved to Richmond, and this past December Chuck made a surprise visit to see Brandon for his graduation from the Masters

of Business Administration program at the University of Tennessee. We still plan vacations together, and now it means so much more since we don't see each other every day.

And, let me tell you, collectively our children have seen it all. I think one of the best protections we can give children in this crazy world is to show them the importance of friendship. Jobs come and go. Family may live near or far away. But friendship can be cultivated anywhere and with almost anyone. In the all-American quest for individual success and our obsession with independence, we have been taught to think of friends as something that only children need; and then in our web-based virtual world, we think of *friending* as something patented by Facebook. Not so. Adults can have great friends, especially if those same adults make the time it takes to nurture those friendships. I think children who actually see their parents playing with their friends will grow up expecting to have friendships that last throughout their lives. My dad always had his bowling buddies, and my mother had a handful of serious phone friends, the kind where my sister and I would be shushed and told to leave the room whenever she was on a call.

In John's gospel, Jesus talks about his disciples, not as the first members of a new religion, not as his prized students of theology, and not as his sales pitch team for growing this thing he's going to call "church." Rather Jesus talks about his disciples as his closest friends. Best friends. At each other's houses all the time friends. Call you up in the middle of the night for bail money friends. He treasures them. He confides in them. Let's face it, he goes fishing with them, he gets in trouble with them, he eats and drinks and celebrates the holidays with them too. He makes being a friend a huge part of the mission of spreading the word about God's love. In one of his most loving speeches, he tells them that no one has greater love than this, to lay down their life for their friends. I'm sure Jesus says that because he feels the haunting reality of

his own looming shadow of death, but he's also calling them to place deep, DEEP trust in one another.

The love that Jesus is talking about is the kind that will transform us, and it doesn't require finding the perfect spouse, or having children, or idolizing your parents for this kind of relationship to be valid. It's not parental. It's not subordinate. It's not romantic, or dependant, or obligatory. It is to be a joy and a delight, a great gift, maybe THE greatest gift. And it's absolutely about the love that is shared between those who consider themselves equals, and who WANT and CHOOSE to share themselves with one another – and create what we know as friendship.

Now, I also read the ever popular 1 Corinthians 13 passage about love this morning. It is one of the tried and true passages chosen mostly for wedding readings. It's probably THE most popular one. You've all heard it read for at least one wedding I'm sure. But I think that it's appropriate for so much more.

When I listen to its poetic rhythm, I hear in it the kind of love that builds a solid foundation for friendship, the kind of soul friendship that allows you to be you in all your fullness. Experiencing and sharing this kind of love is precisely the kind of thing that will help us to grow as human beings and be the kind of people I think Jesus is calling us to be in this world.

Love is patient. Love is kind. Love is not envious or boastful or rude.

Friendships fail when they can't manage this level of thoughtfulness.

Love does not insist on its own way, it is not irritable or resentful, and it does not rejoice in wrongdoing but rejoices in the truth.

True friends know that they will sometimes be insistent, irritable and resentful. We will do wrong things – sometimes so bullishly that we celebrate them. Really good friends help us see our blunders for what they are and help us get to a better place. Christy has talked me off the edge more than once, that's for sure.

Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

I hope and pray for each of you to have a friend who can hang with you during the most difficult times in your life, and in the most joyous times in your life. It takes a special kind of relationship sometimes to do both. Perhaps you've known that friend who always calls when they're the most down and out – but rarely do you ever hear from them when things are going well. Friends believe in you – no matter what.

The love of friends doesn't end. I'm so glad for that. It was oh so difficult to move away from friends that made our lives so special in Tennessee. But I have found now, that though I miss Brandon and Christy and their family, the distance hasn't changed the relationship. We are as close as we ever were, maybe closer. Every now and then we talk about retiring together – and we just may do that someday.

But for now, I share these stories of my friendship with you because it is a part of what Jesus shares with us. He called us to love – and sometimes we make that harder than it needs to be. Surely, he did talk about us doing things like loving the poor and loving our enemies, and those things are tremendously difficult for us to do well. But he also talked about us forming friendships, the kind of friendships that teach us how to love fully and completely, maybe so we will get a taste for how God loves us.

I will always be grateful for the special bond that happened living across the street from a family of neighbors we chose to love, who also chose to love us back. One of the beautiful things about loving those neighbors is that it did help me do exactly what Jesus taught in his commandments. Loving them made it easier for me to love myself and to trust in the love of God. Transformative – absolutely. And now, it helps me reach out to others, in my church family, through Richmond Hill, and even in my suburban neighborhood with greater compassion and a fuller ability to be a friend.

So for today, your “go forth from church and do this because Jesus said so” assignment is easy, remember your friends and let them know how important they are to you in whatever way you choose to do so. Love them. Let them love you. It’s the greatest – Jesus says. And it’s one of those times, like most of those times, that he meant it. It feels great to know you have a friend whose got your back, it makes the world a better place. Amen.