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Saint Thomas Evangelical Lutheran Church, Bloomington, Indiana

We Have Loved God in One Another

1 Corinthians 13:1-13

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. 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. 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.

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. 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. For we know only in part, and we prophesy only in part; but when the complete comes, the partial will come to an end. 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. For

now we see in a mirror, dimly, 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. And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love.

My Siblings in Christ, I begin this morning with a call to repentance. We in the Church have, for so long, believed that the path to God begins in agreement. That the only way to walk this path faithfully is to not convert one another to trust in Christ alone, but to convert one another to *our side*. When we say we desire agreement, we mean we want our way, to prove once and for all that we were right all along. Being right is an idol that perverts our understanding of God's good law *and* God's boundless grace into something that only serves the powerful, only the elite. It benefits the haves and leaves the have nots out to dry. The quest for being right only sows seeds of division, propagating that which it claims to solve. Let us lay aside our drive to be right, and embrace a way beyond measure: the self-emptying, liberating, neighborly love of Christ.

In truth, I do not believe the Church on earth has ever been undivided. The book of Acts outlines a Church divided on the topic of converting Gentiles - asking, do they need to become Jews first? Do they need to assimilate and become like us culturally before they can become Christ like in faith? The earliest letters, dating mere just decades after Jesus ascended to heaven, make mention of divisions between Jew and Greek, slave and free, male and female.

As our theology and understanding deepened, and as our urgency to get it right for posterity's sake also grew, so, too, did division. That's what we see in Corinth: should women preach? what should the Lord's Supper look like? is speaking in tongues evidence of God's favor? If only that were the end of the Church's division. But we know the Church is "... by schisms rent asunder, by heresies distressed." We know reform and counter reform. And today, divisions continue, largely along fault lines that mirror civic divisions, which we debate as if we running for the highest office in the land, trying to convince an imaginary viewership of millions, that we, alone, are right and righteous.

In the face of division, our demand for agreement has perverted God's gifts of Law and Gospel. Pause for a second to remind ourselves that the Law is what shows us the need for God's grace and that which protects our neighbor and creation from our sin; and the Gospel is the good news that sets us free. When we demand agreement, the Law becomes assimilation. It looks not to Christ as its ideal, but to some earthly standard. For millennia, the church asked us to be straight and binary. It demanded agreement to this ideal not on the basis of Christ, but on the basis of unexamined beliefs about human sexuality. The idol of agreement perverts grace in the same way, reducing it to a wishy-washy "God loves you just the way you are." And I do believe that God loves you, and requires nothing of you but faith, which is its own generously given gift. But "God loves you just the way you are" has enabled a multitude of sins. It is a cheap grace which gives more power to the powerful, and leaves the oppressed out. It is a recipe to justify collateral damage. If you are queer, the trouble with "God loves you just the way you are," is that it implies that your queerness was part of the chasm that kept you from God, a lie that feeds the powerful who thrive on opposition to retain their strength. And as long as we swallow that pill for the sake of agreement, the Church will be poorer for it. God loves your queerness.

We know that power uses division to fortify power. When fast food workers ask for a living wage, power looks around for someone who currently makes that wage, EMTs, say, whose families are barely scraping by, and power says, "Debate!" Which, too often, is power's fancy word for fight. The powerful may claim that we're trying to find agreement on the issue, but all that has happened is that the chasm between us has grown.

I am not saying that we abandon agreement, nor that we legitimize every claim as true to save us from disagreement. What I am saying is that, in the face of division there is still a more excellent way—a way beyond measure. To a community every bit as divided as the capital-C Church is today, St. Paul gives them love. When you want to know what is right; when you want to understand the law; when you need to know grace: then, love.

This way holds true today: I can be woke, but if I do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging symbol. If I wish to make people understand what I know, but I do it in order to be right or righteous in the eyes of those who agree with me, I will convince no one. Put another way, I can be moral, but if I do not have love, I am nothing. I can be blameless so as to boast, but if I do not have love, I gain nothing

Love is the lens by which we understand one another. Love is the lens by which we see the law not as a pathway to God that we ourselves can walk, but as a way of protecting

our neighbor so they can be set free by the Gospel. Love is how those on the outside, whose lives power has put up for debate, love is how they are brought in, welcomed and affirmed. Love is how those who were once outside show us that God was there, too, and so expand our understanding of love itself. St. Paul wrote a few chapters earlier that “knowledge puffs up, but love builds up.” Love is how the good we do is built into something more. Love is the fruit by which God is made known to the world in and through us.

The capital-C church has been coming up short in the love department. I think this is enduring problem that, by the grace of God, we will strive to see changed until it is made completely new in the light of the resurrection, and we see ourselves as God has always seen us: a body, one, as God is one. But, on this Sunday, when we celebrate the ministry of people of all sexual and gender identities and expressions, it is worth naming that the church has come up short in loving LGBTQIA+ folx. Instead of marveling in God’s boundless diversity, and hearing the gospel preached to us in ways we never expected, the Church has asked queer folx to change. Be straight, be binary, hide your light under a bushel. Even in a congregation like ours, we must repent because we timidly wait for agreement, cowering to power, convinced that if we just wait long enough, everyone will be swayed to our side, forgetting those who sit unloved by the Church, burdened by our waiting.

But that isn’t our call, Beloved, to sway everyone to our side. We can’t wait for agreement, because we have loving to do now. We have loving to do now.

You see, what we have at St. Thomas...We have an image of God that is unlike anything else that’s out there, because we have met God in one another. We have loved God in loving one another. Paul wrote to Corinth, “Love is patient; love is kind; it bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.” Here, we say to the Church,

Love is courageous,
like queer folk coming out when it was—and is—dangerous to do so.

Love is unconditional,
like parents and allies, fearful for their children’s safety
but loving them *because* of their queerness.

Love is wide,
like the love of queer folx.

Love is as varied and different,
as the physical, mental, and emotional abilities of those who practice it.

Love is a spectrum,
like human neurodiversity.

We have loved God in one another, and, here’s the thing, Beloved, if there is anything we at St. Thomas really need to repent of, it is that we have not been loud enough with the message. With that loving message. Love alone is the balm that heals division. Because love never ends.

Amen.