FIRST (SCOTS) SERMONS

"LOVE HAPPENS"

Scripture Lesson: 1 Corinthians 13: 1-13

This sermon was preached by The Rev. Dr. L. Holton Siegling, Jr. on Sunday, November 16, 2025 at First (Scots) Presbyterian Church in Charleston, South Carolina.

1 Corinthians 13: 1-13

The Gift of Love

1 *If I speak in the tongues of humans and of angels but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal.* 2 *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.* 3 *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.*

4 *Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant* 5 *or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable; it keeps no record of wrongs;* 6 *it does not rejoice in wrongdoing but rejoices in the truth.* 7 *It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.*

8 *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.* 9 *For we know only in part, and we prophesy only in part,* 10 *but when the complete comes, the partial will come to an end.* 11 *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.* 12 *For now we see only a reflection, as in a mirror, 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.* 13 *And now faith, hope, and love remain, these three, and the greatest of these is love.*

Love Happens

Leader: The word of the Lord.
People: Thanks be to God.

We have almost always had a dog in our home. In fact, I can't remember a time when we didn't. Our current dog is named Marshall, and while you might reasonably assume we named him after Peter Marshall, the great preacher and chaplain of the U.S. Senate, the truth is that we named him after Marshall Boulevard on Sullivan's Island, the road that runs along the beach.

One of the things I appreciate most about Marshall is how, each night as we prepare for bed, he makes his rounds to ensure that everyone is where they should be. If someone is missing, he notices it; he begins to pace a little and continues to look around. I share this because, in a strange and grace-filled way, Marshall helps us understand something about the nature of love: love isn't static. Love waits. Love watches. Love truly does something—it happens!

Consider the nature of God's love. Have you noticed that God is never idle? God is always engaged in some form of activity—creating, redeeming, sustaining, forgiving, restoring. You can hardly turn a page in the

Bible without witnessing God at work. For God, love is not simply a mood or a slogan. No! In a biblical sense, God's love moves, creates, and reconciles.

In our reading from Jeremiah chapter 31, God speaks to His people who have been unfaithful—they have pursued idols and essentially turned their backs on God. Yet God declares: "I have loved you with an everlasting love; therefore, I have continued my faithfulness to you. Again, I will build you, and you shall be built, O virgin Israel!" Jeremiah shows us that God's love persists despite betrayal. Similarly, in 1 Corinthians 13, the Apostle Paul invites us to consider a question that cuts to the heart of the Christian life: How is who I am and what I am doing reflecting God's love?

A love that is patient and kind, a love that bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Such is the heart of God, because God is love, and God's love never fails; it never ends. We use the word love quite often, perhaps too often. We say we "love" a TV show, a cup of coffee, or a football team, but that kind of love is fleeting. The love of which the Bible speaks is something far deeper. Rather than a feeling that comes and goes, Biblical love—Godly love—is an act of the will that finds expression.

Paul puts it like this: "If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal." In other words, spiritual gifts, eloquent speech, and even faith strong enough to move mountains are empty and hollow if they are not rooted and grounded in love, because without love, even our best efforts won't amount to much.

The kind of love Paul describes is anything but passive. It doesn't simply feel compassion; it moves with compassion. It shows up, it serves, and it even suffers. We see God's love most clearly in Christ Jesus, our Lord, who was and remains the ultimate expression of God's love. We saw it as the Word became flesh and dwelled among us, humbling Himself as a servant, taking on the frailty of a child, and ultimately offering Himself on the cross.

When Jesus gathered His disciples in the upper room on the night before His crucifixion, He gave love its clearest expression in bread and cup: "This is my body, given for you." "This cup is the new covenant, sealed in my blood." We remember what Jeremiah said: "The days are surely coming," says the Lord, "when I will make a new covenant…I will forgive their iniquity and remember their sin no more." That new covenant was not written with ink but with blood, and it shows us that love—true love—costs something; and for Jesus, it cost Him His life.

In the book *The Cost of Discipleship*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer states, "When Christ calls a man, He bids him come and die." To put it another way, to love as Jesus loves means to take up our cross, to bear with one another's weaknesses, to forgive when it would be easier to hold resentment; it means to speak the truth when silence would be safer. Love in this context is not merely about being nice; it is about being holy; and as Scripture shows, holiness can sometimes resemble turning over tables.

This realization is vital because many people have come to believe that loving someone means never judging them. While Jesus said, "Judge not," it is important to understand that He was not forbidding moral discernment—He was condemning hypocrisy. Judging with love does not mean standing over someone with condemnation; rather, it involves standing beside them and recognizing that we are all under the same judgment of God. When Jesus addressed the woman caught in adultery, He said, "Neither do I condemn you;" however, He did not stop there. Jesus also spoke the truth in love, and He instructed her to, "Go, and sin no more." We notice how Jesus' concern was expressed in love!

Elsewhere in Romans 12, the Apostle Paul advises us: "Do not repay anyone evil for evil… If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink." Such is the radical ethic of God's kingdom—a love that extends even to those who have wronged us. We should also remember how Jesus loved His enemies until the very end. As the nails were driven into His hands, He prayed, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do." At this table, we recognize that we, too, were once enemies of God, yet Jesus, out of great love, died for us.

When Paul wrote 1 Corinthians 13, he was addressing a divided church, one that was burdened by pride and competition—a spiritual rivalry, if you will. And Paul was basically telling them, "You can have all the gifts in the world—prophecy, tongues, knowledge—but if you do not have love, you have nothing." On the other hand, love builds up the church, because love forgets itself. It doesn't insist on its own way; it does not envy or boast. Rather, love rejoices in the truth, bears and believes, hopes and endures—and in this way, love is not an attitude, but an activity!

When our church family takes an ornament from the Angel Tree in Molly Wier Hall to buy a Christmas gift for a family in need, or when someone takes meals to the hungry, or knits a prayer shawl for those who are suffering, or when a Stephen Minister shows up—that is love! That is what makes a church beautiful. It is not simply about the architecture or the music; it's not solely about theology. It is about the lived reality of Christ's love made visible through His people.

Now, if love never ends, as Paul writes, the implication is that love has a beginning. The Bible makes it very clear that, "We love because God first loved us." And that is a reaffirmation of the promise found in Jeremiah 31: "I will be their God, and they shall be my people… I will write my law on their hearts." Which is another way of saying that when we live out God's love, we become the letters of the gospel for someone else; we become living witnesses to the world of a love that is patient and kind—it bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, and endures, even when it is difficult to do so.

When Marshall waits by the front door, he has no idea what time we will come home. He doesn't know if we will be gone for an hour or all day. But he waits anyway, trusting that the people he loves will return to him. That's what love does. It waits. It watches. It hopes. And, friends, our Savior does the same. Jesus stands at the door and knocks. He waits for His family to be gathered, for His children to come home. God's love is relentless—not because we are faithful, but because God is. At this Table, He welcomes us again: the prodigals and wanderers, the weary and doubting—all of us. This, too, is where love happens. Bread is broken. A cup is shared. The love that was present before the foundation of the world meets us in the simplest of acts: eating and drinking, remembering and believing.

"Faith, hope, and love abide, these three," Paul says, "but the greatest of these is love." And isn't that remarkable, that even greater than both faith and hope is love? Perhaps that is because, one day, our faith will become sight, and our hope will be fulfilled. But love—love is the language of eternity. And when love actually happens—when it becomes more than just words, when it takes on flesh in our words, our deeds, and our forgiveness—the world catches a glimpse of the kingdom of God. So, as we come to this Table, let us remember that love is not something we merely feel; it is something we live.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.