

First Congregational United Church of Christ  
Sixth Sunday after Epiphany- February 11, 2024

Scripture lesson: I Corinthians 13:4-7

## THE POWERS OF LOVE

What is love? It's the best one-word answer we can give to who God is. It's also the best answer we can give to what our lives are meant to be about as those who are created in God's image. But what does love look like *in practice* day by day by day?

As Roman just read for us in I Corinthians 13, St. Paul says that love is patient and kind. It's not envious, boastful, arrogant, or rude. It doesn't insist on its own way. It's not irritable or resentful. It rejoices not in wrongdoing, but in the truth.

Yes, yes, yes, yes, and yes again. And those aspects of love give us plenty to work on our whole lives long. But Paul says that there's more to it. As he continues in verse 7, he reaches higher, farther, and deeper. It seems like he wants to *sing*, and not just say, that love "bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, and endures all things."

Does he go over the top with that? He's completely convinced of the importance, beauty, and power of God's love as revealed in Jesus. But does this love really bear, believe, hope, and endure ALL things? What can that mean? Maybe Paul has gotten too mushy and gushy about it.

Yet if we think about the kind of life that Paul led because of his convictions about God's love, it's hard to imagine him getting all squishy and sentimental about it. In his ministry to spread it far and wide, he suffered, as he says in II Corinthians 6, "afflictions, hardships, calamities, beatings, imprisonments, riots, labors, sleepless nights, (and) hunger" (verses 4, 5).

With grueling experiences like those suffered because of his commitment to God's love, I think he's worth hearing out when he says that it bears, believes, hopes, and endures ALL things. If anyone has the credibility to make such a claim, I'd say it's him.

So, what does he mean? Let's take these four powers of love that Paul proclaims and see, one by one, the sense that he gives to them.

First, love bears all things. The Greek word, *stego*, which Paul uses here has at least two distinct meanings, both of which he appears to intend. One- and perhaps the first one that comes to mind for us- is love's ability to bear the difficulties and troubles that come as we strive to love people who are not *entirely* lovable, which, of course, is all of us.

For instance, we learn that we have serious disagreements with each other. With the love that bears all things, we commit to sticking together. We resolve to hear one another out, to compromise wherever possible in recognition of what's most important to each other, and, finally, if necessary, to agree honorably and respectfully to disagree.

With the love that bears all things, we also bear graciously each other's foibles and quirks. We strive to honor one another's passions, gifts, and insights, even those so different from ours that we need to strain in trying to understand them. Faced with the countless ways in which we can sorely test each other's patience, kindness, and selflessness, we don't give up. With the love that bears all things, we keep striving to love.

Secondly, *stego* can mean “to protect, cover over, or keep hidden”. In this sense, love bears *up* or supports other people by keeping confidential those things about them that should be kept confidential, especially their shortcomings, failures, weaknesses, and sins. As Christian writer, Lewis Smedes, has put it: “(L)ove has a fine sense for when to keep its mouth shut.”

This, of course, is a BIG challenge since it can be so tempting to spread ugly news about the shortcomings, failures, weaknesses, and sins of other people. Think again of how delicious it can be to spread ripe, juicy, and negative gossip. But the love that bears all things does *not* do that.

Yet neither does it *cover up* sin that needs to be exposed both for the sake of the wrongdoer and of those hurt by them. The philandering or sexually predatory minister or priest, for example, must be suspended and ultimately defrocked. The embezzling boss or employee must be stopped and publicly convicted. The repeatedly abusive spouse must be arrested and openly held to account.

At the same time, the healing both of wrongdoers and of those hurt by them *is* often best served by keeping the matter out of the public spotlight. The love of God that bears all things, moves us therefore to discern with great care when to cover over *and* when to expose. We seek to practice that crucial wisdom for the sake both of wrongdoers and their victims.

Next, St. Paul says that love “believes all things”. Does that mean that love is totally gullible? Does it believe that every phone call, text message, e-mail, tweet, tabloid story, and Facebook, TikTok, or Instagram post is truthful and well-intentioned? It certainly does not, because love is not stupid.

But neither is it cynical. When we’re cynical, we regularly suspect the worst of people. We assume that even when it looks like someone is acting out of selfless good will they’re in fact always doing it out of narrow self-interest.

In believing all things, love instead desires, looks for, and seeks to bring out the best in everyone. Unlike cynicism, love’s primary motive is not self-protection, but self-giving. It’s relatively unconcerned about getting ripped off or taken advantage of, so that it’s willing to take a chance on others. It’s open to giving a second, third, fourth, and fifth chance, or as Jesus said, is ready to forgive seventy times seven.

If this sometimes makes love appear to be naïve, it’s not because love refuses to recognize that selfishness and deceit frequently do prevail both in and among us. Love is fully aware of that sad and painful fact but is still ready to give the benefit of the doubt as much as possible. As the great Protestant reformer, John Calvin, once said, “(The Christian) will reckon it better to be imposed upon by his own kindness than to wrong his brother (or sister) with unfriendly suspicion.”

So, in teaching that love believes all things, Paul is saying that love believes everything about everyone that’s in keeping with the truth that God loves all of us unconditionally. Love always believes, therefore, that every person has ultimate dignity and worth. It freely admits to the awful things that we can and in fact frequently do to one another, but also knows that each of us, from the self-absorbed narcissist to the inveterate liar to the corrupt politician to the murderer on death row to you and to me is still made in God’s image. Love knows that, as such, each of us is always of great and equal value in God’s eyes.

Recall again our reflections last week on the movie, *Dead Man Walking*. It tells the true story of Sister Helen Prejean, a Catholic nun who ministered with great love to a Louisiana death row

inmate named Matthew Poncelet. What kept her working month after month with Poncelet, a convicted rapist and murderer who persisted in trying to manipulate her and in denying his responsibility for the terrible crimes that he'd committed?

She clearly saw the evil in him. She never turned a blind eye to it, yet with the love that believes all things she was able, first and foremost, to keep seeing him like God does- namely, as one of God's precious own. With that same love at work in us we, like Sister Helen, refuse to turn our backs on or to belittle anyone or anything that God loves.

Thirdly, Paul says that love hopes all things. Sometimes it can feel like certain people are working overtime to squeeze our hope dry. Amid so many hurts, disappointments, and hard times suffered at the hands of others, apathy and indifference can often be severe temptations. "Oh, she's just hopeless," we say, or "He is *such* a loser."

But with the love that hopes all things, we remember that new beginnings are always possible. Our hope stays strong because we keep the faith that indeed God's love is always at work everywhere. With the power of that love, we're able to keep glimpsing new light and fresh possibilities on every horizon.

So, we hang in there even when an alcoholic friend falls off the wagon for the umpteenth time. Or we refuse to give up even when our marriage is hammered again by a spouse who's unfaithful. It can feel like we have every good reason to be thoroughly discouraged and heartbroken but the love that hopes all things keeps igniting fresh hope and determination in us.

Yet still- what about the friend who *keeps on* drinking or the spouse who *keeps on* betraying us, no matter how much or how long we hope for them? It can feel so completely foolish to keep hoping in situations like those, BUT . . . in the power of God's love, we learn to sit loose. We sit loose with the time frames and deadlines that we usually like to set.

We come to see that despair easily threatens us whenever we set our due dates too tightly or define our hopes too narrowly. With the love that hopes all things we remember instead that people remain forever in God's loving hands, even when we personally become so frustrated with them that we need to step away from them, whether for a short while or even the long haul. It's especially in those times, that the love which hopes all things reminds us that our hope for one another and for the whole world is always rooted firmly in God's love and never merely in our own.

Finally, love endures all things. With God's love, we're able to keep pursuing the right, the good, the true, and the beautiful even when we're ridiculed, assaulted, and attacked for it. In this vein, I think again of the stunning example of 6-year-old Ruby Bridges.

Back in the 1960s, she was the first black child to enroll at an all-white public school in New Orleans. Every morning at ten minutes to eight she walked with a group of U.S. Marshals past teeming crowds of jeering and hate-filled adults who taunted and spit at her all along the way. She would spend every day in school alone with her teacher as the only student in the class, because all the parents of white students refused to let their children attend any class she was in. Her teacher gave witness to what she saw and heard on one of a typical morning when Ruby arrived:

"A woman spat at Ruby but missed; Ruby smiled at her. A man shook his fist at her, and Ruby smiled again. Then she went up the steps and stopped and turned and smiled one more time.

You know what she told one of the marshals? She told him that she prays for those people, the ones in the mob, every night before she goes to sleep.”

Only six years old, but deeply nurtured in our faith by her parents, her minister, and her church, Ruby Bridges was filled with love’s power.

With that power, we endure. Even in those times when it feels like everything is falling apart, we persevere. We hang tough through the trials, adversity, and hardship that the daily practice of love inevitably faces.

So, with the love that endures all things, the couple suffering through a wrenching time of misunderstanding and conflict keeps sitting together at the breakfast table every morning to strive at working it through.

The parents whose ill baby son cries through the night, night after night, keep getting up to give their child the care that he needs.

The adult children whose mother no longer knows them and that they no longer recognize as the person that she once was, still go faithfully to be with her as she sinks deeper into the mire of Alzheimer’s.

The bringer of good news to the poor, despite the principalities and powers arrayed against her, keeps struggling to bring a greater measure of loving care, justice, freedom, and peace to those who are hungry, thirsty, naked, strangers, sick, or imprisoned.

And the congregation that for 15 years has seen eight different settled, interim, or long-term supply ministers come and go, and that knows the steep challenges which come with so many leadership changes (particularly when a global pandemic is thrown into the mix) gets ready once again to welcome with open arms and warm hearts another new pastor.

With Pastor Landis, you will gratefully remember and carry forward the cherished treasure of gifts that God has long given to you in your distinguished past. You’ll seek to recognize, receive, and share freely the rich, new treasures that God is also ready to give as you consider anew, for example, how you can best invite and welcome all of God’s children to join you as faithful disciples, especially those who through most of Christian history have been wrongly excluded from the church’s life.

Through it all, you will be on the move with Jesus, practicing the disciplines of his Spirit that will enable you to keep up. You’ll keep praying, above all, that no matter where he may lead you, a closer walk with him will always be your choice.

In other words, with the endurance of love and with clear-eyed honesty about how difficult it can often be, we, as the people of God, keep on loving one step at a time and one day at a time.

In conclusion, as we look forward from this Sunday, we especially celebrate the fact that the song of love that St. Paul sings was never sung more beautifully or passionately than on the cross of Jesus. This coming Wednesday, we’ll enter again the season of Lent. It will be the time when the church pointedly remembers that in the cruelest pain and agony suffered under the torrent of mockery, ridicule, and abuse that spewed forth on Calvary’s hill, God’s love in our flesh bore all things, believed all things, hoped all things, and endured all things for our sakes.

With our faith in him, we trust that this love remains tirelessly at work to transform the whole of creation until that great day when God at last will be all in all. In the meantime, the power that it gives to bear, believe, hope, and endure all things is given to us through the Holy Spirit. With that power, you, the people of First Congregational United Church of Christ, will continue

to pursue your historic mission. You'll keep striving to change the world to the glory of God by living the teachings of Jesus, our Christ. Amen.