**Symphony of Love**

**First Baptist Church, Albemarle**

**October 21, 2018**

Amy and I and some friends of ours from college went to be cultured at the North Carolina Symphony a couple of weeks ago in downtown Raleigh. The night was filled with beautiful music played by talented musicians of the movie soundtrack of the original Star Wars. High above the orchestra was a large screen that played the original film from 1977. Below the screen, the North Carolina Symphony played all of John Williams’ highly acclaimed score live as the movie played. The musicians were so good that I often found myself lost in the movie and not even realizing the music was being played live by the North Carolina Symphony. The mix of the sound of the film and the live music was a perfect blend to help you experience the 40-year-old film in a new way.

Paul’s famous “love” chapter from his letter to the Corinthians describes a perfect blend of our hearts and actions to produce a magical symphony of love! I believe it is important to understand Paul’s teachings in the original context. 1st Corinthians was written from Ephesus about the time of the Passover in the third year of his final missionary journey. He had planned to visit Macedonia and then return to Corinth probably by the year 57 A.D.. However, the news that came from Corinth changed his plan. He had heard of the abuses and contentions that had arisen among the Christians in the church, first from Apollos and then from a letter some in the church had written him of the issues, and also from some of the church members who had visited him in Ephesus. So, Paul wrote this letter, for the purpose of encouraging the followers of Jesus and correcting the erroneous opinions that had sprung up among them and remedying the many abuses and disorderly practices that prevailed.

The conflicts in the church were numerous. They were divided in whom they were going to follow. Some wanted to follow Apollos, others wanted to follow Paul. Some in the church were practicing sexual immorality out in the open, even viewing it as a source of pride. People within the church fellowship were taking one another to court because they could not talk out their differences. Some were still participating in idolatry by sacrificing food to other gods and then eating the food after the sacrifice. In addition, they were fighting about who should participate in the Lord’s Supper and who should not. Conflict existed everywhere!

As Paul addressed the issues one by one throughout his letter, he tries to end his letter with a larger perspective of who the Body of Christ should be and how they should relate with one another. In chapter 12, Paul addressed the issue of spiritual gifts. Within the church there was a competition of who had which gift and which gift was greater than others in the sight of God. The Corinthians believed that a hierarchy existed within the church, beginning with apostles, prophets, teachers, miracle workers, healers, helpers, leaders, and tongue-speakers in that order. After debunking this idea that a hierarchy existed among the gifts, Paul preached about the Body of Christ being one body with many parts. Every gift and every person have a role to play within the church. Paul exhorted the Corinthians to develop their gifts as given by the Spirit and work in a perfect symphony of love with one another.

With that in mind, that leads us into chapter 13. It is poetic and paints a beautiful image of true love. So, when we use it in a marriage ceremony, we are not misinterpreting the message of Paul’s words. It is the way a husband and wife should love one another. It just wasn’t the context in which it was written by Paul.

Paul's overall position is unmistakable. Whoever lacks love, no matter how many gifts or the type of spiritual gifts received, is "a noisy gong," "clanging cymbal" or absolutely "nothing" at all. If you do not act in love, you are nothing but a nuisance to the body. Anyone who acts without love does more harm to the church than good.

From Paul’s perspective, love isn't about any specific act. Love is not necessarily busy or an outcome-driven endeavor. One commentator wrote, “On the contrary, Paul sees love as a vibrant tapestry reflecting an array of wonderful hues that flow from God's Spirit, transforming and ultimately mending broken human relationships.” Love is about relationships. Love is characterized by patience, kindness, humility and considers the needs of others before self. It is not jealous, envious, proud, easily angered or bitter. Love weeps over evil and celebrates goodness. "It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. Love never fails.” (v. 4-8a)

The most important aspect of love is that it involves a commitment to and a concern for the well-being of the other. It means we prioritize people everywhere, not programs or our own comfort in the church. In the context of a community torn apart by divisions, love offers a “most excellent way” of bringing healing and unity back into the fellowship. That is what Paul was reminding the church in Corinth and that is what this passage reminds us this morning. All that we do and all that we say should reflect the love described by Paul in order to produce a symphony of love in the church that is compelling to those who have not experienced it in the world.

Paul teaches that love begins deep within the heart. “If I speak in the tongues of men or of angels, but do not have love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal. If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have a faith that can move mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. If I give all I possess to the poor and give over my body to hardship that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing.” No eloquent words, no use of our gifts and even the ultimate sacrifice of self without love is of use in the kingdom. If it doesn’t come from the depths of our hearts filled with love that is focused on the good of the other, it is of no use. Good works isn’t good without true love.

But what then is love? Paul gives us a list of what love is and what love isn’t. N.T. Wright suggests that when given a list like this, we take it slow, a line at a time, and reflect on three things: first, ways in which we see this quality in Jesus himself; second, ways in which we see it (or don’t see it) in ourselves; and third, ways in which, if we were like that, it would work out in practice. This should be done prayerfully, asking for God’s grace when grace is needed for the times we have failed to live up to the standard of love.

As we go through this list, I invite you to close your eyes, put away all distractions and see through your mind’s eye of what true love is.

Love is patient. Time and time again, Jesus remained patient with his disciples when they did not understand. How is your level of patience? When have you displayed patience out of love for the other person? When have you failed to have the patience needed because you lacked love for the other person? How would your relationship with others change if you had more patience with them?

Love is kind. The kindness of Jesus is throughout the gospels. Think of the ways he treated those who were marginalized and those who did not have a voice in that culture. Think of the kindness he showed to the woman caught in adultery and the Samaritan woman at the well. Think of the last time you showed kindness to them out of Christian love? How was your kindness received? How did it change your relationship with that person?

Love is not jealous. Jesus was never jealous because he knew his identity. Do you believe that you are created in God’s image to do good works? When was the last time you were jealous of someone? Why did you feel that way? How would it have changed the relationship with that person if you celebrated with them rather than stewed in jealousy?

Love does not brag, and it is not arrogant. Jesus did not have to make himself feel better by putting down others. Jesus always lifted others up out of his own humility. Do you brag? Are you arrogant? If we are honest with ourselves, we can probably find times when we try to feel better about ourselves by putting others down. How would your relationships change if you showed Christ-like humility?

Love is not rude or self-seeking. Jesus was never rude because he always desired the best for the other person. Jesus never sought to seek attention on himself and never looked for ways to get his own way. Even in midst of facing death, Jesus sought the will of his Father. Do you have to have it your way? Are you always the smartest person in the room? Do you have to always have the last word? How would your relationships change if you put the needs of the other person before your own?

Love is not easily angered, and it keeps no record of wrongs. It does not delight in evil but celebrates the truth. Jesus got angry at times but it was always directed at evil. When the powerless were being taken advantage of, Jesus directed his anger to the powerful. Jesus hated injustice and he opposed those who took advantage of others. Yet, Jesus forgave those who would repent. Scripture tells us that God casts sins as far as east is from the west. Do you get angry at those you love? Do you hold on to your grudges? How would your relationships change if you did not get angry at the little things and you let go of your grudges?

Love always protects, always trusts, always hopes and always perseveres. Love never fails. In life, LOVE WINS. There is not a time, no matter the circumstances, when love doesn’t win out in the end. It doesn’t mean there isn’t a lot of heartache or difficult decisions to be made but when we act out of true love, it will always win out because love is the most excellent way. Think about how our world would change if we lived LOVE in every aspect of life?

True love desires the very best for others. I believe this is a body of Christ that is willing to do whatever it takes for the sake of God’s kingdom. I believe this congregation is willing to sacrifice for others to know Jesus and have a saving relationship with him. I believe we are people of faith who is willing to match our hearts and our actions in perfect harmony in order for those outside of these walls can see and experience a perfect symphony of love. This Is Us!