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 Hudson
 I Corinthians 12:31b 13:13
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SCRIPTURE: *I will show you a still more excellent way. 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 move 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 wrong doing, but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never ends. But as for prophesies, 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.*

SERMON: Consider it for a moment. If I were to ask you what you think is the most difficult part of premarital counseling for me when I meet with couples . . . what would you say? I asked a number of people last week. And you can guess what they said: sex and money. But they were wrong. The part I dread most is asking the bride and groom to be to pick scripture for their special day. Without fail I get that blank embarrassed stare, that deer-in-the-headlights syndrome . . . they invariably have no clue. And then, after a painfully prolonged silence, one of the two will get one of those light-bulb-over-the-head looks . . . and blurt out: *Have you ever heard that piece about “love being patient and the greatest of all?”* And after confessing that I have heard it read once or twice at weddings . . . I agree that it would be a good choice. A good choice, not because of it’s originality . . . but because there’s nothing that captures the essence of love so well as Paul’s words in the 13th chapter of his letter to the Corinthians.

Now I know what some of you are thinking, “love”?

- How quaint to think it’s all about love . . . like so many trite songs:
All You Need is Love.
 - How naïve to think the world would be a better place if we just could be a bit more loving.
 - How typically simplistic of a preacher to harp on love as the ultimate answer.
- And to that, I say . . . trite it may be . . . it also happens to be true.
 Paul’s got it right here. Everything else is perishable – wisdom, faith & money.

Everything else has limited reach. The *only* truly eternal thing is love. Love transcends when all else falls short.

It sounds so basic, so obvious, so simple. The question is, “Do you believe it?” “Do you believe that love is the center of it all?” “And even more, do you live it as if it were true.” That’s clearly what Jesus said: he summed up the whole of the law in the words . . . love God and love each other. But I don’t think the Corinthians believed it.

What does love look like? I like the way Frederick Buechner put it. He said: *The first stage is to think there is only one kind of love. The middle stage is to believe there are many kinds of love and that the Greeks had a different word for each of them (eros, philia & agape), The last stage is to believe that there is only one kind of love.*

We may confuse a lot of things for love: lust, carnal desire, yearning and cravings . . . but in the end . . . those are not love. We know it, but sometimes we get confused, don’t we? They may come along with a deep love. But they are not love itself. Love is placing another first . . . not just when we feel like it . . . but when it’s the last thing we feel like doing. That’s love. Love is wanting the best for the other . . . and doing all in our power to make it so. Love is a presence of sincerity . . . even when we’re tired, even when we’re worn out. Love is what makes life worthwhile. Without it . . . life gets pretty hollow and shallow. I’m convinced we all crave it . . . and yet, few of us are very good at sharing it.

What does love look like? I like the way a little nine-year old girl said it. She said
When someone loves you, the way they say your name is different. You know that your name is safe in their mouth. (Martie McMane)

Isn’t that great? You know your name will always be safe in their mouth. They’ll always speak in ways that build you up, that support you . . . that love you.

Remember where this chapter about love came from. Remember what Sue Ann told us last week . . . Paul wrote this letter to the Corinthians because they were in a great big fight. They were debating which gifts were the most important and the right way to use them. Speaking in tongues, prophesy, knowledge, faith, charity. Paul says they may all be good . . . but without love, they are nothing.

Think of it . . . knowledge can be a good thing. Especially when we’re desperate and need answers. If you get a growing pain in your chest that you can’t explain, you go and find a doctor. And not just any doctor. You want a doctor who really knows his or her stuff. But if all a doctor can do is lay out the facts, explain the disease and lay out a plan of treatment (as much as we may say that’s what we yearn for) . . . but doesn’t approach us with love . . . they are not worth much in the end.

What does love look like? Sometimes we can hope for nothing more than someone to cry with us . . . or to celebrate with us. What does love look like? Sometimes we get love confused with being on the right side of an issue -- standing up for justice and fairness. But to be prophetic without love, is nothing more than a noisy gong or a clanging symbol.

There was a young professor who was on a plane in the late sixties and found himself seated next to Dr. Martin Luther King jr. He introduced himself to Dr. King and as the trip went on, he told Dr. King that he had participated in the civil rights movement on his own campus.

But he went on to say that his work for racial justice had alienated him from his father. He told King how his father didn't understand him and that they'd grown apart. *What can I do*, he asked. *What can I do to raise the consciousness of my father, to make him see that he is a racist, that all his pious talk about "loving black people" is just a lie?* Dr. King put his hand on the angry young man's hand and said, *Your father's doing the best he can. He hasn't had your educational opportunities, opportunities your father gave to you. As a Christian, you must be patient with him and love him.* (Willimon 12995)

Love doesn't insist on it's own way. It doesn't brashly insist on ideas of the head . . . it looks instead to convert the heart.

Paul's got it right. People possess a whole lot of gifts. Those gifts were found all over the place in the Corinthians: knowledge, prophecy, faith and hope. And the gifts were good . . . very good. But without love . . . they were nothing.

Faith, hope, love abide, these three, but the greatest of these is love. Or maybe . . . maybe it's *Faith, hope, love abide . . . but without love you have nothing . . . and with love, you have everything.*