

A Love that Never Stops Looking
1 Corinthians 13:1-13
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When I asked our Women's Wednesday Bible study group if they had heard this passage read during at least one wedding, all of them raised their hands and a number of them indicated they used it in their *own* wedding service. And I imagine if you took a poll of those who know the Bible and asked them what words of the apostle Paul they thought most memorable, a significant percentage might choose our sermon text, the verse we're going to focus on today, 1 Corinthians 13:7, "Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things."

It is a verse that, at least, is *one* of Paul's most familiar, and somehow over the ages it has managed to be recited to the world on everything from bumper stickers to stained glass windows. It has even made the rather dramatic leap from ancient Corinth to modern cross-stitch – there's one done by my wife Roberta that's graced our house for years.

But there is, a huge gulf between being memorable and being *meaningful*, and so these words do require a little study. Or to put it another way, when Paul writes, "Love believes all things," does he mean that when a politician makes a campaign promise we are bound by love to believe it? When Paul writes, "Love hopes all things," is he suggesting that we hold to our dreams and desires even when they are dashed against the hard facts of life? To put it another way, though these words of Paul may be known to some of us, we may not always know exactly what they mean. So let us take this verse, phrase by phrase, in exactly the same order Paul gives it.

First, “love bears all things.” This seems easy enough on the surface: with love, we can brave any battle, survive any adversity, find some triumph even amidst tragedy, some peace and future in a life that seems at times to be all too confounding. The minister, Bob Crilley, who has heavily influenced this sermon, points out that, “Love, we sometimes say, binds all wounds; it heals all heartaches; love bears all things.”

But as we look deeper, we “find Paul speaking a word not only to how we confront our own difficulties, but also to how we respond and react to the difficulties of *others*. Let me ask you, have you ever found yourself in a situation where you were so consumed by anger and resentment toward another that you said to yourself, ‘I can’t bear to be around that person anymore. I just can’t bear it?!’” Can’t stand it. “Ah! Now, that situation puts a different spin on these words, does it not? Love bears all things; love shares all things; love links together all of our lives in an endless chain of Christian compassion – so much so that if we are ever truly to become the family of faith” that I believe every church is called to be, “then we are bound by love to lay aside our individual differences.” We are to agree to disagree. We are to recognize our common devotion in Jesus Christ our Lord. Yes, love bears all things.

There’s an old Jewish folktale – a legend, more than anything else – about Abraham and Sarah. As the story goes, Abraham’s tent was always open to strangers because of his strong belief in hospitality and in befriending those who traveled the desert sands. On one particular occasion, an old man happened by, looking for a place to rest and perhaps impose upon his hosts for

a meal. Both Abraham and Sarah were only too willing to oblige and invited the elderly gentleman into their tent.

But over the course of supper and throughout their ensuing discussion, it soon became painfully evident that neither Abraham nor Sarah had much in common with this old man. Not only did they disagree on matters of morals and ethics, they did not even share the most basic of beliefs. Finally, Abraham could take it no longer. “Out of my tent,” he shouted. “I will have nothing to do with a man like you. I can’t even bear your presence and I have wasted enough of my hospitality already!”

Before the old man was out of sight, though, Abraham heard the voice of the Almighty calling out his name. Abraham answered, “Speak, Lord, your servant hears you,” The Lord said, “For eighty years, I have protected and cared for the old man you just threw out of your tent. I have continued to claim him as one of my own even though he did not claim me. I have waited patiently, for he too is one of my children, Ah, Abraham, if I could bear with him all this time, could you not bear with him for just one hour?” And the great patriarch fell silent, recognizing what he had done. (Story cited by Bob Crilley)

“Love bears all people. Love cares for all people because all people are of God. There is no one who is not a member of God’s family, no one who is not a member of God’s flock.” (Bob Crilley)

Love believes all things. What does that mean? Let me begin by telling you what I’m all but positive it doesn’t mean. It doesn’t mean that when one lives a life of love one becomes extremely naïve and ready to swallow any old

thing that comes along hook, line, and sinker. Let's be honest, we live in a world where sadly, not everything can be believed, and not everyone ought to be trusted. That's why we lock our doors at night; that's why we read the fine print before signing the document; that's why we warn our children about stranger danger. The truth is, in this world of ours a person just can't go around believing all things. So what is Paul getting at when he writes here that "love believes all things?"

Well, I think we may be able to find a clue from another passage of Paul's. In his letter to the Romans the apostle writes, "We know that in all things God works for good." It is that deep trust in God Almighty, that confidence that God is continually at work in this world that stirs at the heart of these words "love believes all things." Love never stops having faith!

Perhaps some of you have seen that old comic strip about a little boy trying to put up a swing in his backyard. The first frame pictures the young boy securing the ropes of his swing to a small sapling. Unfortunately, the tree's not too much bigger than the boy, and the obvious result is that the swing drags on the ground. The second frame depicts the boy scratching his head curiously as he summons his imagination, searching for a way to overcome this rather difficult dilemma. Finally, in the last frame, the small lad returns with a hose and begins watering the tree with the obvious belief that, with God's help, who knows! It just might grow a foot or two. (cited by Bob Crilley)

Now, that is a wonderful portrait of faith – captured, believe it or not, in a comic strip. Love believes all things. It never stops having faith that we are all part of God's purpose, all part of God's future. That is what love believes, and

it believes such because God so believed in this world that “He gave His only Son that whoever lives and believes in Him shall never die but have eternal life.”

“Love hopes all things” – or perhaps more literally and profoundly put, “in all things love is able to find some hope.” Says one pastor, “There is no storm so thick or cloud so dark that the sun will not eventually break through; there is no road so rocky or path so perplexing that the traveler will not eventually find the way home. So it is with life, so it is with love: ‘love hopes all things.’”

Let me illustrate this with a child’s game I’ve played with my children and grandchildren. It’s not a unique game, to be sure. Hannah is too old for it now and Austin is almost too old. But on our most recent visit to our grandchildren, I played peek-a-boo with him for probably the last time. I put a towel or my hands over my eyes and peek-a-boo. Austin smiles or giggles. When he was younger, if I were to do the same with *his* eyes he wouldn’t look. He just assumed Granddad disappeared. But now, he will move his head above or around my hands or the towel to try to find me. Yes, he will look!

Just a simple lesson from a child’s game, right? But how quickly we forget that simple but important lesson!

We grow up and when obstacles are thrown in our face, we often freeze. We don’t move; we just stand there. Instead of throwing *off* the towel and looking, we throw *in* the towel and give up. We stop looking! Friends, love hopes all things! It never stops looking! Where there are obstacles, love is

looking for opportunities! Where there are problems, love is looking for possibilities! Where there are worries, love is looking for windows of meaning and a way forward. Yes, love hopes all things. In other words, love never stops looking! Please remember that as a church in this interim time.

And the last phrase, “love endures all things.” Let me start again with what it doesn’t mean – If you are in an abusive relationship, this phrase is not telling you to endure that. NO – Get out.

Now, what is most intriguing about what this phrase does mean is the word Paul chooses. It’s actually borrowed from an architectural term, and in Paul’s day, it meant, literally, “to put a roof on a house.” To “endure” was “to cover” and thereby provide both shelter and security for those who dwelt beneath. And so, points out one commentator, what the apostle is saying here is that “love covers all things.”

“Love embraces all things! It surrounds all things! There is nowhere we can possibly go where the love of God is not able, at the same time, to find us and to free us. And no matter how severe our shortcomings, no matter how frustrating our failures, no matter how disappointing and discouraging those difficult defeats in life may sometimes be, the love of God is able to comfort us and to carry us, able to protect us and provide for us, able to heal us and make us whole once more.”

What wonderful news, for when it comes even to this verse itself, I must confess that I don’t always love in these ways. My love too often falls far short. But God covers, God forgives, even this! And this gives us the strength to renew these kinds of commitments to such a love.

In fact, it is the love that ever embraces us, the love that continues to cover us, the love that spiritually surrounds us, that calls us to do the same for others. We are to continue to love one another because God first loved us. And as both a church and a faith family, what must first keep us together is that which first brought us together – the love of God.

And, friends, the love of God never stops looking. It covers all things and it never ends. Amen.

SOURCES

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