

But the Greatest of These Is...

Worship Associate David Fu, Channing Memorial Church, UU, Ellicott City, MD January 4, 2026

One week ago I had the pleasure and honor of playing in a string trio at a friendly acquaintance's 50th wedding anniversary celebration. It was a small affair, with maybe 20 folks in attendance, and among the guests was the best man, Joe, and, just as he had done 50 years ago, he read this morning's second reading, First Corinthians, chapter 13. Perhaps it was familiar to you, as it is a very popular reading, mostly read at weddings. It was certainly familiar to me, not in the least because it was read at Cathy's and my wedding. And they are good wedding words, no doubt about it.

But as I listened last week, hearing verses 4 through 7, my thoughts turned away from marriage and toward the current state of affairs in our country. While Joe read them, I felt that these words drew a stark contrast between Love and current events. Indeed, thinking of our leaders, I found myself ticking off a box labeled "nope" at each phrase: patient – nope, kind – nope, does not envy – nope, ..., is not easily angered – nope, keeps no record of wrongs – nope, rejoices with the truth – nope, nope, nope. If anything, Robert Frost's "Fire and Ice" seems to be a more fitting "tune for our times", reminding us that hate could bring about the end of our world. And the irony that in *that* poem hate is personified as ice, a word which coincides with the initials of a particular governmental agency. That irony, sadly, is not lost on me, though I wish it were otherwise.

In any case, I recognized this as good sermon fodder, and since I knew I was "on the hook" for this morning's service, I made a mental note to look into First Corinthians chapter 13, and moved on. The rest of the evening was a delight.

Later, I remembered that First Corinthians is not at all about marriage, but rather about building community. And not just any community, but Beloved Community. The books of Corinthians in the New Testament are the apostle Paul's letters to an early Christian community in Corinth that was struggling to learn how to be a Church, struggling to learn how to Build a Beloved Community. His use of the word "love" is neither romantic, nor is it about the long term relationship between a pair of people.

You may recall that I am a big fan of the King James Version of the Bible; and though its language can be archaic and opaque, I often find it to be beautifully poetic as well, and it is my first "go to" when consulting scripture. And so now, I would like to share with you the version of First Corinthians, chapter 13, as found in my vintage King James "pocket" Bible with leather zipper case (brandish it):

1 Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, and have not **charity**, I am become as sounding brass, or a tinkling cymbal.

2 And though I have the gift of prophecy, and understand all mysteries, and all knowledge; and though I have all faith, so that I could remove mountains, and have not **charity**, I am nothing.

3 And though I bestow all my goods to feed the poor, and though I give my body to be burned, and have not **charity**, it profiteth me nothing.

4 **Charity** suffereth long, and is kind; **charity** envieth not; **charity** vaunteth not itself, is not puffed up,

And, in the interest of brevity, and to spare you some admittedly abstruse King James language, I'll skip to the end:

13 And now abideth faith, hope, charity, these three; but the greatest of these is charity.

Charity, charity charity. What?! I had never heard this. I went to double check on the internet, and sure enough the word in the King James Version is “Charity”, while in every other version I checked (there are convenient tools for doing so on the internet – I do so love the internet...), every other version, including the so-called “Modern King James Version”, the word used is “Love”.

Well, perhaps we have a translation issue. Paul’s letters were written in Greek, and the original Greek word in the scripture is “**Agape**” (Pronounced uh-ga-peí). Agape. Ahhh! Now we’re cookin’ with gas! Agape is God’s Love of humanity, and the Love that humans should have for God and for one another. Also called “Christian” love, as in the love that Christ had for humanity. The final piece of the puzzle is that Agape more or less coincides with the original meaning of the word “Charity”. Indeed, from the Wikipedia entry for charity we have the following:

The King James Version uses both the words charity and love to translate the idea of caritas/ἀγάπη (agapē): sometimes it uses one, then sometimes the other, for the same concept. Most other English translations, both before and since, do not; instead, throughout they use the same more direct English word love. Love can have other meanings in English, but as used in the New Testament it almost always refers to the virtue of caritas or agape.

Words and translations are funny things.

Let us move on to the remaining verses. To keep things interesting (I hope), I will substitute the word Agape for Love:

8 Agape never fails. But where there are prophecies, they will cease; where there are tongues, they will be stilled; where there is knowledge, it will pass away. 9 For we know in part and we prophesy in part, 10 but when completeness comes, what is in part disappears. 11 When I was a child, I talked like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became an adult, I put the ways of childhood behind me. 12 For now we see only a reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known.

13 And now these three remain: faith, hope and Agape. But the greatest of these is Agape.

Basically, if we do it right, if we “grow up”, we will realize that prophesy, that knowledge, and that “tongues” are all fallible, are all less important, all are in the end, not worthwhile in and of themselves. They are “childish things”, and while we are “children”, they cloud our vision of the Beloved Community.

Prophecy: We need to realize that we cannot predict the future, and when the unpredictable happens, and people are in need, we need to summon our compassion.

Knowledge: We need to realize that we cannot know everything, and that the pursuit of knowledge is not the pursuit of Beloved Community. When someone is hungry, you cannot feed them with your knowledge.

And Tongues: We need to realize that talking, that arguments and discussions will not get us to Beloved Community, either. Words cannot clothe the unclothed.

And when we do grow up, when “completeness comes”, we will see that all that is left, all that we can really count on, all that really matters, are faith, hope, and agape. These three are the pillars of, the bedrock of, the building blocks for building Beloved Community. Indeed, *hope* is the vision of a better future and of the Beloved Community; *faith* is the willingness to keep on trying to get there no matter what is happening; and *agape* is what we give one another and what we do for one another as we build the Beloved Community. Agape is something we *do*, *both* with our hands *and* with our hearts. If we don’t *do* anything, hope and faith are just dreams and good intentions. This, *This* is why “the greatest of these is agape.”

There are some not-so subtle Agape and Building Community tie-ins with this morning’s story for all ages. I especially like it when Shichiri asks the Thief to leave some money to pay taxes, which, at least in some places and times, is money that can be used for the common good. But there might be more... I say this because I have access to, I believe, a slightly different version of the koan, but since my text, which is in a Zen Buddhist comic book, is on loan to a certain beloved minister whose name rhymes with Schmane Shmith, I found myself looking for the story on the internet. Irksomely, every version I found had identical

verbiage, which made me wonder if I had conflated “my” version with another koan, which is entirely possible, since there are several Zen koans about robbers and Zen teachers. Nevertheless, I shall proceed according to my perhaps faulty memory.

And so what I remember is that the ending is different. Just as the Thief is leaving teacher Shichiri’s house, Shichiri calls out, “Oh! And be careful out there, I hear that there are robbers about!” It is in this way that Shichiri *implicitly* acknowledges that he considers the Thief to be a guest and *not* a thief.

But wait! There’s more! Shichiri’s warning can also be thought of as being about a different kind of robbery. Not the physical robbery of money or goods, but a spiritual robbery: the robbery of our compassion, the robbery of our humanity, the robbery of our agape. And who is the perpetrator? Fear. Hatred.

The Thief has been robbed of their Agape, and has thus turned to thieving. Shichiri treats the thief with Agape, and in doing so becomes instrumental in the Thief’s recovery of their Agape. The Thief becomes a disciple of Shichiri, and spreads more Agape around the world.

May we live to do the same.

Amen.