

## The Greatest of These

William Stell  
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*1 Corinthians 13:12-13 — 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 remain, these three; and the greatest of these is love.*

These two verses end one of the more popular chapters in the bible. More than likely, you've heard it read at multiple weddings. It's worth remembering, though, that when Paul wrote, "Love is patient; love is kind" and so on, he wasn't addressing couples about to be married; rather, he was addressing the large, diverse, and conflict-ridden church within the Greek city of Corinth. That said, I think that the lessons about love in this passage apply to love between spouses and partners just as much as they apply to love within a community of faith. Love is love — in any context.

This week, as I've been reflecting on 1 Corinthians 13, the very last line in the chapter has grabbed my attention: "faith, hope, and love remain, these three; and the greatest of these is love." What does that mean, exactly? What does it mean to say that among these three things, love is the greatest?

The root of the Greek word that Paul uses here for "greatest" is *megas*. Often, the word is used in reference to size: to say that something is *megas* is to say that it is big, large. So, perhaps Paul is saying that love is the biggest, the most expansive of these three things. That makes sense to me. Love encompasses and embraces all that is. Even for those who lack faith, and even in those corners of the world that seem to lack hope, love is not and is never absent. Because God is everywhere, love is everywhere — even where faith and hope are not.

In addition to meaning big or large, the word that Paul uses for "greatest" can also refer to age. So, he could also be saying that love is the oldest, the most longstanding, the most enduring of these things. That makes sense to me as well. If God is love, as the apostle John writes, then love is eternal — beyond time. So, when Paul ends 1 Corinthians 13 by writing that the greatest of these things is love, perhaps he is saying that love is the biggest and oldest, the most expansive and most enduring of these things. That's a fine interpretation, I think. But this morning, we're going in a different direction.

Throughout this past week, I have been seeing something else in Paul's statement — something that has arrested my attention and still holds me in its grip. In the New Testament, the things that get described with the Greek word *megas* are often things that are grand, loud, powerful, awesome, awful, or scary. To give some examples, in the New Testament we read about a great noise, a great storm, a great mountain, a great king, a great terror.... The greatness to which *megas* refers, then, is often wondrous, heroic, or fearsome. So, here's the truth on which I've

been meditating this week: faith, hope, and love remain, these three; and the most wondrous, the most heroic, the most fearsome of these is love.

A few years ago, I worked as a hospital chaplain for a summer, during which I visited hundreds of patients on about a dozen different units. You see a lot of hard things in a hospital, as you all know. When I began the job, I thought that it would be hard for me to see people in such physical pain. I anxiously imagined being in rooms with patients who were crying and screaming because of their bodily suffering. Within a few days, though, I realized that modern medicine has rendered such situations fairly rare, and anyways, before long I got used to being with people in physical pain.

I then turned my anxiety to the emotional pain of patients. I thought about how hard it would be to see people who were sick, dying even, without friend or family to touch, to hold. One day, I walked into the room of a woman who had just been admitted to hospice. She was on the phone when I walked in, and I started to leave, but she motioned me to stay. From what I overheard, the woman was talking to her daughter, and as the conversation was winding down, I could tell that the woman's heart was sinking. After she hung up, she looked at me and said, in a quivering voice, "She doesn't want to come." The woman burst into tears and sobbed for several minutes. Witnessing the emotional pain of abandonment or loneliness is very hard. But it wasn't the hardest thing for me to see that summer.

More so than patients' physical pain, and even more so than patients' emotional pain, the hardest thing for me to see, in all honesty, didn't come from the patients at all; it came from their loved ones. The hardest thing for me to see was the love of patients' family members and friends as they were being confronted by the loss of their loved one. Virginia tells me that she just can't imagine what life will be like when the cancer takes Scott. Daphne tells me that after all the crazy adventures, like living out of a van and traveling the country, it's unbearable to see Bill leave like this. And Vestel tells me that what he wants more than anything in the whole world is to go home with his wife Linda tonight, fall asleep next to her, and for neither of them to wake up. "Why won't God just let us do that?" he asks me.

The greatest lesson I learned in the hospital that summer — and when I say "greatest" here, I mean the most fearsome — is that everyone, all of us, at some point in our lives, will experience something like what Virginia, Daphne, and Vestel experienced — and this will happen to us not in spite of our love, but precisely because of our love. To accept the blessing of love is to accept the curse of loss. And the more, the better, the longer we love, the worse, the harder, the more excruciating our loss will likely be. It's as tragic an irony as any I've yet encountered. At times, it almost seems cruel to me.

But friends, here is one of the greatest things about love — and here, "greatest" means wondrous and heroic: in spite of the loss ahead of us, in spite of the pain that we know is coming, we keep loving anyways. We still strive for love each and every day, and we still affirm that love is God's

greatest gift to us — greater even than faith and hope. Love is fearsome, because it is inevitably followed by loss, but love is also wondrous and heroic, because we choose to love even so.

Here's the takeaway this morning: loving others — your family, your friends, your enemies, and strangers — is the greatest thing you could possibly do, and what may seem like small, simple, every-day gestures of love are nothing short of heroic. A sincere hug, a caring question, a thoughtful letter, a helping hand... these are what make a great life. We may wish for faith that can move mountains; we may dream of inspiring hope in many; we may strive for this or that accomplishment, this or that status, but we are still seeing through a mirror dimly. We strive so desperately, because we still know only in part. Once we enter into God's full presence, and we are given full knowledge of the truth, we will understand that no matter what else we did, no matter what else we accomplished, the greatest thing about our lives is our love.

Your every-day gestures are heroic acts, friends. May the spirit help us, each and every day, to love abundantly and thereby live greatly. Amen.