

Sermon Starter

Scripture Commentary And Sermon Starter: Love Is A Luggage Tag

What does love look like for your congregation? Can love be given and received via Zoom, FaceTime, through a glass window, or behind a face covering? In a post-pandemic reality, we are rethinking what love feels and looks like, aren't we? Fortunately, Paul reminds us that while the delivery may be different, love remains the same.

Although we read parts of 1 Corinthians 13 at wedding and anniversary ceremonies, Paul wrote this letter to a church in crisis. All his work to bring people to Christ is on the verge of dissolving and his pastoral work, done remotely, is unraveling.

The congregation at Corinth started well. Paul and his associates gathered a widely diverse group of people who committed themselves to living the life of Jesus Christ. They formed a community and focused on the common good. When Paul left them, the Corinthian congregation was growing and thriving. Then, things started to fall apart as the members reverted to old patterns: the community began honoring the rich over the poor, the religiously gifted over those gifted differently, the educated over the illiterate, men over women, and adults over children. In the early days, the Corinthians celebrated and embraced their diversity—each person valued for their uniqueness, each one's gifts celebrated as they all contributed to the whole. But now, their differences are problems. Paul issues a call to return to love.

In Paul's testimonial on love, he uses the Greek *agape* nine times to emphasize its importance to and for communal life. For him, love is an expression of commitment to a life in community; one that values each person and the gifts they bring. Every contributor is celebrated because they are now family—biology did not matter as much to Paul as the theology of community, church, and communion. His image of the Body of Christ emphasizes that each person, each part of the Body is vital, important, and necessary for the thriving of the whole.

What does love look like for Paul? It is patient and gentle. It is not envious, boastful, arrogant, rude, selfish, irritable, or resentful—all the things the Corinthians were exhibiting! Christian unity was turning into Christian bickering—not the behavior expected of siblings in Christ. Paul's letter is a reminder to the folks at Corinth that God calls them to a better way—a way that is centered in love and results in unity while respecting differences; a way that sees in the other a kinship that transcends familial boundaries; a way that serves others from a place of love; a way that values others for who and what they are. The way that Paul points to is about faith and hope and love.





Howard Thurman grew up during the early 1900s in Daytona, Florida, where educational opportunities for Blacks were limited. There were only three high schools for Blacks in the entire state. The closest private church-related high school was in Jacksonville, about 90 miles away. His community pooled their resources to send him to further his education.

At the train station, Thurman learned he would have to pay extra to ship his rope-tied trunk and he did not have the money. Alone and dejected, he sat on the steps of the rail station. A stranger, a Black man, asked why he was crying. After Thurman explained his situation, the man paid the extra fare. Before Thurman could thank him, the man walked away, and Thurman never saw him again. The dedication to his autobiography reads:

*To the stranger in the railroad station in Daytona Beach
who restored my broken dream sixty-five years ago*

Thurman went on to become a renowned scholar and theologian and influenced the likes of Martin Luther King, Jr.

The stranger saw a young man in despair and his generosity made a difference—he expected nothing in return, he just saw a need and responded. The man may or may not have thought of his gift as an act of love, but it changed the trajectory of Thurman’s life.

This is what One Great Hour of Sharing does for men and women, young and old, across the planet—it restores broken dreams, resurrects hope, and carves a path into the future.

What does love look like for your congregation?

As you prepare to receive the One Great Hour of Sharing offering, recount for your church what love looks like in your context. Share how your gifts make a difference for neighbors near and far whose names you do not know and whom you may never meet.

During the height of the Covid-19 pandemic, a constant refrain was “We will get through this—together!” That’s what love looks like—people willing to share their resources to make the way easier for others—offering hope, kindness, and care. Agape is love that is rooted in concrete acts of compassion: helping to rebuild after hurricanes and tornadoes; teaching farming methods as the climate changes; providing chickens to stave off poverty; and, yes, even paying the fare for a stranger at a railroad station.

Through all kinds of weather, and even in the unknown, love remains – and love lived in community transforms the world.

¹ *With Head and Heart: The Autobiography of Howard Thurman* (New York: Harcourt & Brace, 1979), dedication page, 24-25

Children's Moment

Constructed to be used in your own words or followed as a script, this children's moment illustrates some of the ways children know and experience love as well as share it with others. Please adapt for your setting and community. The script and design may be adjusted to fit your virtual or hybrid worship context.

THEME

One Great Hour of Sharing shows us what love is by helping others live abundant lives connected to God's creation. There are many ways for us to experience love and to share that with others. Sometimes, we just need to think about love in new ways.

MATERIALS NEEDED

- An affirming listening ear, eager to engage children's ideas!
- Coinboxes to pass out to the children.

SCRIPT SUGGESTION

I want to ask you a very serious question: If I told you I loved you, what would you say?

Give time for responses.

Now, what would you say if I asked you, "What does love look like?"

Give time for responses.

In one of the books of the Bible, a man by the name of Paul, we sometimes call him "Apostle Paul," wrote some ideas about this.

He said that love is patient, is kind, and is truth. He also says some things love is NOT: love is not rude or irritating and it does not do wrong to others.

Have you ever heard that? He even says that love never ends.

Wow! Can you think of ways that you could be loving toward another person? Maybe in your family or at school?

Give time for responses.

One of the ways we can show love is to help others.

Through a special offering called One Great Hour of Sharing, we have the chance to help other people we may never meet. One of the projects we have helped make possible was rebuilding a school after it was destroyed by a hurricane. Doesn't that sound like a way to love another person? Would you want someone to help rebuild your school if it was destroyed?

Next, pass out One Great Hour of Sharing coinboxes to children and families OR arrange for them to be given out at an appropriate time.

You have a chance to show love to others through this offering, which you can collect through the next week [or two].

Here is a special bank that will help you show love to others. At home, I'd like you to think about all the times you experience love. And with your family, maybe each night at dinner, or when you have breakfast, think and pray together about how you want to make a difference. Maybe you want to put in a coin or even a dollar for every time you feel loved.

Or maybe you want to count all the times you've done something loving toward another person and add an amount of money for every time. I bet you can think of a lot of creative ways to help! It's a way of being mindful of all that we have, being grateful, and helping others.

Share any details about when your congregation will be receiving the offering, and when and how they should return the coinboxes.

Let's pray a blessing together on these banks and on the offering we'll receive with them. What do we hope God will do?

Allow for all their prayer requests. All prayers are welcome!

Very good! Let's pray:

If you are comfortable doing so, incorporate the specific requests and wording offered by the children in your prayer with them. And/or you may wish to use this prayer:

Dear Lord, thank you for loving us so much and showing us how we can love others. Use the offerings we will put in these boxes to change someone's life. Help us love those we will never even meet. With thankful hearts, we pray. Amen.

Order of Worship

Call to Worship

ONE: Love is...

ALL: all people being heard and no one being left behind.

ONE: Love is ...

ALL: acts of justice and mercy.

ONE: Love is ...

ALL: compassion, forgiveness, humility, and reconciliation.

ONE: Love is ...

ALL: this and so much more.

ONE: Love is ...

ALL: truly the greatest!

Prayer of Invocation

Giver of life, we open ourselves – body, mind, and spirit – to worship this day with an attitude of generosity and gratitude. We pray that faith, hope and love would fill us and our faith community so that it carries into our neighborhoods and across the world which you so lovingly created. Indeed, let love be known in all that we say and do. In the name of the one who showed us what love is, the name of Jesus. Amen.

Responsive Reading

ONE: Love is patient,

ALL: but sometimes we want things to happen on our schedule.

ONE: Love is kind,

ALL: but we do not always show that in our actions towards others.

ONE: Love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude,

ALL: but there are times when we are.

ONE: Love does not rejoice in wrongdoing,

ALL: but rejoices in truth and freedom.

ONE: Love bears, believes, hopes, and endures.

ALL: Our deepest desire is to do the same.

ONE: Love can be shown through our actions.

ALL: Love is resilient determination.

ONE: Love digs deeper.

ALL: Love gives more.

ONE: Love is made evident in big and small ways,

ALL: and the world is a better place.

Invitation to the Offering

Around the world, gifts given by this faith community to One Great Hour of Sharing weave together a tapestry of faith, hope, and love in action. We are grateful for the opportunity to change the world through our acts of kindness, large and small.

Maria von Trapp (whose story inspired *The Sound of Music*) once said, "It will be very interesting one day to follow the pattern of our life as it is spread out like a beautiful tapestry. As long as we live here, we see only the reverse side of the weaving, and very often the pattern, with its threads running wildly, doesn't seem to make sense. Someday, however, we shall understand."¹

The tapestry we weave includes a mother working alongside an entire community to rebuild her child's school after a hurricane; a new homeowner starting over after a devastating tornado; and chickens providing a new future for a family. We cannot be in all of these places ourselves or even see them with our own eyes; but through our generous gifts, we can show that love remains, despite all obstacles. Let us give, joyfully and generously, in that spirit.

Continued on next page

Prayer of Thanksgiving

ONE: Love is a drink of clean water and a breath of clear air. For the opportunity to contribute to these necessities,

ALL: we give you thanks, O God.

ONE: Love is a warm blanket given to a refugee family in an unfamiliar place. For the opportunity to wrap another in the fabric of love,

ALL: we give you thanks, O God.

ONE: Love is a pathway to home ownership after a tornado rips through a community. For the opportunity to bring another person home,

ALL: we give you thanks, O God.

ONE: Love is women empowered to support themselves by raising chickens. For the opportunity to help make this dream a reality,

ALL: we give you thanks, O God.

ONE: Love is people responding to the needs of a hurting world, trusting that love can make a difference. For the opportunity to respond in our own community,

ALL: we give you thanks, O God.

ONE: Love is people serving their neighbors, believing that transformation is possible. For the opportunity to transform the world,

ALL: we give you thanks, O God.

Prayer of Dedication

We offer these gifts, O God, in the spirit of love. May the gifts that we offer this day embody our loving response to your great love for us. Through these gifts, may others clearly see the love of Christ. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Benediction

ONE: Faith, hope and love will remain for the ages to come.

ALL: Faith is trust and belief rooted in Christ.

ONE: Hope is not wishful thinking, but deep trust in God.

ALL: Love is the greatest—because it is the fabric of communal life.

ONE: Love binds us together as the body of Christ.

ALL: Faith, hope and love remain forever, but the greatest of these IS love.

1. Trapp, Marie Augusta. *The Story of the Trapp Family Singers* (William Morrow Paperbacks/HarperCollins, 2001), 83

Worship Resources for Any Season and for Any Reason

Whether you are looking for a call to worship, a pastoral prayer, or an offering invitation, we want to help make **One Great Hour of Sharing** a meaningful part of your church's worship service. Maybe you are lifting up a special concern for those affected by a recent disaster, or maybe you just want to celebrate this ministry of the church that reaches so many parts of the globe. Here are some of the ways that pastors and worship leaders might incorporate **One Great Hour of Sharing** into the liturgy, in any season and for any reason.

CALL TO WORSHIP

Leader: Let us give thanks to God for every good gift; let us give thanks to God for people of courage who help to give hope wherever there is need.

People: Today we especially pray for the people in the path of [*Hurricane Michael*] – those who have lost their lives or their loved ones, those whose livelihoods and homes have been battered by the fury of wind and sea and storm.

Leader: Be with them all, O God, with your tender mercies and abiding hope.

People: We pray for those first responders who indeed offer hope in tangible form – firefighters and paramedics, police officers and soldiers, doctors and nurses, pastors and so many others who brave danger and are a source of comfort and strength.

Leader: Our prayers will not cease when the storm passes, nor will our gifts. We are grateful for **One Great Hour of Sharing** and its partners who are assisting so many who will be there when the cameras are gone.

People: Thanks be to God for people who are generous with their time, their talents, their prayers, and their gifts, for they are surely a sign of God's good reign. Amen.

PASTORAL PRAYER

After the storm:

Loving Creator,

We know that you are with us in every time and place. In all things, you are faithful. But when winds are raging, we may find it hard to hear your voice. When skies are dark, we may struggle to see your face. When all around is chaos, fear and destruction, the peace you promise seems worlds away.

And yet we continue to seek you in the storm. And we seek you in the morning after. Surround us with the certainty of your loving presence.

To those in raging winds, speak words of calm and comfort. For those in great darkness, send light. For those surrounded by the remains of what was, answer the silence with promises of all that might be.

Hear our prayer, O Lord. Renew our strength for the days ahead. May we hear again your call to be the Church, to speak comfort to those who weep, and to be present with those who suffer. We trust that you have given us every gift we need to meet the needs of this time. Teach us to walk in the way of Christ – sharing all that we have, and believing in your goodness in all things. Send us in your peace, Holy One. And may there be joy in the morning. Amen.

OFFERING INVITATION

Hurricanes and natural disasters bring out some of the best in people. Folks of every race, of every religion or no religion, of every class, step forth to help those who are hurting; whose lives are in shambles; who may wonder if anyone cares about them in the midst of so much suffering. They need not wonder, for folks with trucks and boats have helped carry people to safety, have helped get desperately sick people to hospitals, have tried to make sure that families stay together and have a safe place to recover. Know this: we too are those people. We may not drive a truck or pilot a boat, but we too can help our neighbors in dire need. While we may want to join our hands to those [*in the affected area*] now is not yet the time. We are ready to help when our presence is needed. But in the meantime, we can pray. And we can give. Every dollar given for disaster relief to One Great Hour of Sharing—our wider church family's disaster relief ministry— will go to work through our partners to assist those impacted by this terrible [*description of the situation*]. Long after the headlines have faded and the cameras have been turned off, One Great Hour of Sharing and its partners will still be there helping with long-term recovery. Please give generously, knowing that your gifts will help both now and in the months and years to come.

