*When the Complete Comes*

I Corinthians 13:1-13

Today we are dealing with Paul’s letter to the Corinthian church. Evidently the church had written to Paul about matters of dissension in that community of faith. Several had been boasting about their spiritual gifts, arguing about whether it was appropriate to eat food sacrificed to idols, and others were engaged in flagrant acts of immorality. Here, Paul answers their letter call for unity and accord more in keeping with gospel living. This week we get to the “better way” spoken of in other parts of Corinthians. It might be helpful to know that the type of love Paul talks about is what we call *agape.* In the Greek language there were three different kinds of love. First, the word *eros* referred to a kind of romantic love, a Valentine’s Day type of love. Second, they had a word *philia,* a kind of love one has for a close friend or family member. The third kind of love was *agape,* an unconditional kind of love one has when they care about other people even if they do no5t deserve that love, even if they do not return that love, even if they do not appreciate that love. That is the kind of love Paul talked about in his letter to the Corinthian church. With that in mind let’s hear the word of Paul.

So often the good that we do is not motivated by agape kind of love. Instead we do nice things for others in the hope that maybe some day they will return the favor or we will get something we need, attention , love a little bit of peace of mind. And so it was a day when I was still a teenager living at home. I had decided that I would help my mother out a little and clean and mop the kitchen floor. I was seeking her approval and figured just maybe I would get a word of thanks from her. Some things had spilled on the floor while my mother was gone and I got it into my head to clean the whole floor. So I got a bucket, filled it with water, found an old rag and began to scrub. When I was done, I was pleased the whole floor had been scrubbed clean and not one speck of food or dirt was visible. So I put the bucket and rag away and waited for the arrival of my mother, waited to hear the words I so desperately wanted to hear, “Wow! Someone cleaned my kitchen floor! That is just wonderful!” I imagined how my mother would thank me and perhaps get me a special treat. So I waited. At last I heard the front door open and my mother entered the scene. I could hardly contain the excitement bursting within me and could hardly wait till she entered the kitchen. I did not expect what happened next. Her words were, “Who ruined my newly waxed floor?” A 500 pound weight could not have crushed me lower and laid my heart out so flat. I did not get supper that night and could hardly face the rest of the family the next day. My good intentions got the opposite result. My actions had been done to get something that was not forthcoming. So I climbed into bed that night disappointed and empty of what I had wanted.

There are times when we do our faith for the reward available, eternal life. So we go about doing good deeds to “insure” our place in God’s kingdom. We scrub the fllors of life itself expecting hear a good word from God, or get a good feeling about having done something we suspect will please God and get us a reward. We do our good deeds because we want others to see how faithful we are and then to love us for our demonstration of faith. We act out of our own self-interest. We are called upon to do good deeds. It’s part of our faith and a great way to express our faith. Our deeds can flow out of our knowledge that Jesus wants us to do good. But simply doing good is not enough because it so often comes from our own self-interests. But something happens as our faith is allowed to grow and mature. We begin to discover just how great God’s love for us is and our love for God grows. Our faith growth works toward becoming complete, that is being so mature in our faith that all our actions and thought are directed toward God and evolve out of our love for God. That is where the center of agape love comes from. We do things because we love God more than our concern for our own welfare. It is a kind of love that truly sees another from the possibility of God’s perspective, the kind of love that will risk listening to one we disagree with to try to understand their viewpoint even if we deem it wrong.

It is relatively easy to disagree with and demonize those with whom we do not see eye to eye. It requires agape love to be able to bridge our disagreements and divisions to seek to maintain fellowship with one another. This is the better way that Paul talks about. He wants them to stop quarrelling and to practice agape love.

The Russian novelist, Dostoevsky said, “While nothing is easier than to denounce the evildoer, nothing is more difficult than to understand him.” Fred Craddock, a great teacher of preaching once said, “What marks you as a Christian is not who you will feed but who you will eat with.” The essence of love is not merely providing goods and services to those in need. Rather the heart of love is a willingness to enter into a deep and caring relationship with them as well.” That was the secret of Mother Theresa’s success. She entered into the lives of the poor and destitute, befriended them in a deep and meaningful way.

We took a youth group down to the center of Monroe and it was there that I witnessed an agape kind of love take place. The youth were to serve dinner to the homeless. Mostly the adults served dinner and the youth did an amazing thing. They were out in the dining room interacting with the people who were eating. They were joking and laughing with them and listening to some of their stories. The youth had gotten to know the people in a deeper way.

The kind of love that Paul speaks about is a difficult kind of love unless we have the love of God within us. Sometimes the only ways we can do agape love toward our enemy is to see the other through God’s eyes. We simply cannot imagine q person like Saddam Hussein, Hitler, Ed Gein, or any other human that has committed atrocities to fellow humans being love by God, and we have an extremely difficult time imagining what good God sees in them. We love it when the bad gust lose or get their just rewards. But what about the person who has attacked us personally with slander, or the person who cuts us off in traffic, or the one who constantly opposes us or criticizes us? Don’t we have just as difficult a time seeing them as beloved of
God? And don’t we especially have a hard time loving those who thi8nk differently, dress differently or in a way that offends us, or expresses their faith differently?

While I was in seminary I remember a particular student who liked to crack every joint in his body throughout the class session. I hated that class because I could never get away from what I though was one of the most irritating mannerisms anyone could engage in. I thought, how rude and arrogant that person was to impose his bad habit on everyone else. Well, I didn’t learn much in that class because of my reaction to his persistent behavior. And I began to dislike him immensely. In looking back, I wonder what a gentler response to his behavior would have been. Could I have approached him and let him know, in a gently way, that his mannerism made me feel uncomfortable? Perhaps he didn’t even know he was doing that behavio9r all the time. There were certainly better ways of handling the situation, ways born out of agape love. That’s how difficult it is to practice agape love. We just don’t want to upset thing, to run the risk of confronting another in a loving way, out of our love for God and all that God has created.

In a country of gently rolling hills there lived a man. He had grown up from humble beginnings. While he was growing he watched and listened and learned about life. When the time was right he left home, gathered a few companions around him and began to speak of what he had learned. He spoke of a better way of living, a way of agape love. You see, he saw a bigger picture and knew what it took to practice agape love and the difficult path it took toward that kind of love. His ideas flew in the face of current practices and traditions, and he began to make enemies. But he didn’t turn back from his teachings. He loved others so much that his love for them caused healing and wholeness to blossom. He loved God so deeply that he understood what it would take for creation to be whole again. He knew the strife of his time, the corruption, the factions fighting over rules. He knew the alcoholics, the embezzlers, the thieves, the adulterers and he knew the pain they bore. And he had compassion on them all. He embraced humanity so deeply that he sacrificed his very life to give them the message of love in his example. He forgave those who gave him excruciating pain and mocked him and spat on him. In all of that he would not let go of his love for them, but took it with him into the deepest depths and brought it back on the highest pinnacle as an example to all humanity of what it means to love. We adore this man, we worship this man, we praise his name, we call him God’s Son, Jesus Christ, King of Kings.

It is when we understand that sacrificial kind of love that we can do agape love,. Jesus didn’t do it for himself, he did it for us. I wonder what it would be like if more people practiced that kind of love. It happens when we allow God’s unconditional love to filter through our deepest being.