

Friends remembered Damian Sobol, from Poland, who was one of the seven killed in Gaza. Damian got started with World Central Kitchen just days after the war in Ukraine began, serving coffee, tea, and meals at the Polish border. Kim remembers her first stint volunteering with the kitchen, and the loving kindness that Damian embodied: “Damian was the guy doing all the behind-the-scenes stuff at these outposts. Logistics, supplies, volunteers. The stuff that either feels like invisible magic when done right or like noise pollution when not.

He’s the guy to look for when you arrive, I was told. He shakes my hand. Looks me in the eye. Smiles. How am I doing, he asks. He thanks me for showing up. And then he’s off on an errand, back later. I’m in good hands, he lets me know; these volunteers will show you everything. He was right, of course....Off he goes onto another task. [His life] a beam of light....a road full of promise, of dreams fulfilled.”⁵

We cannot make sense of Damian’s death, or that of the thousands of other people whose lives have been taken and affected in that conflict. But Damian and his team entered into an unintelligible, complicated situation with love. Their actions are heroic, not because of the number of meals they offered or because of their bravery. It’s because of their selfless service, which came at the ultimate cost; a cost we know well as followers of Jesus.

When nothing else in the world makes sense, love still does. When conflict tears us apart, love still finds a way. Love draws us together and it shows us where meaning and purpose lie. As the Contemporary English Version of the Bible puts it, “I would be nothing, unless I loved others....I would gain nothing, unless I loved others.” Our patient and costly service may be mundane, in our household tasks or the things we do to support our church or community. Our service may come on a grander scale like Damian’s did. Whatever our actions, when love is what grounds them, then we are following Jesus, the one who shows us that love is borne out in service. Then we are living in communion with God’s Spirit, whose love brings meaning to all our living. All glory and honor, thanks and praise be to God. Amen.

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First Presbyterian Church
of Royal Oak

May 5, 2024
Sixth Sunday of Easter
“Loving Spirit”

Rev. Emma Nickel
Scripture: 1 Corinthians 13:1-13

The British poet U.A. Fanthorpe wrote a poem titled “Atlas.” Its title references the figure Atlas, in Greek mythology, who held up the whole heavens or the sky. Her poem goes like this:

*There is a kind of love called maintenance
Which stores the WD40 and knows when to use it;
Which checks the insurance, and doesn't forget
The milkman; which remembers to plant bulbs;
Which answers letters; which knows the way
The money goes; which deals with dentists
And Road Fund Tax and meeting trains,
And postcards to the lonely; which upholds
The permanently rickety elaborate
Structures of living, which is Atlas.
And maintenance is the sensible side of love,
Which knows what time and weather are doing
To my brickwork; insulates my faulty wiring;
Laughs at my dryrotten jokes; remembers
My need for gloss and grouting; which keeps
My suspect edifice upright in air,
As Atlas did the sky.¹*

Fanthorpe writes about some of the most mundane acts of daily life. They are quiet actions and ones filled with care. She makes clear that all of them—paying bills, remembering chores, dealing with the house—are all acts of love. The poem reminds us that many kinds of love are not mushy-gushy; love is not just an emotion. Love is something lived out and it is something we actively do. A blogger named Anna, who reflected on Fanthorpes’s poem writes, “It’s not grandiose or flashy, this kind of love...Sometimes there is little satisfaction to be gained in giving it. Sometimes it is an act of grace.”²

That sounds a lot like what Paul wrote to the Corinthians about love. If ever there was a passage of scripture that had been read so much as to become cliché, it’s probably this one. Many of us are familiar with its words, or at

1 U.A. Fanthorpe, “Atlas,” *Safe as Houses*, 1995, Peterloo Poets.

2 Anna, “There is a kind of love called maintenance,” February 11, 2020, <https://nimbusofawriter.wordpress.com/2020/02/11/there-is-a-kind-of-love-called-maintenance/>

3 Richard B. Hays, *First Corinthians: Interpretation commentary for preaching and teaching* (Louisville: John Knox, 1997), 222).

4 Hays, 231.

5 Kim O’Donnel, “When you know one of the fallen,” April 2, 2024, https://kimodonnell.substack.com/p/when-you-know-one-of-the-fallen?r=45uwt&utm_medium=ios&utm_source=substack

least we think we know what it says. But so often, these verses are taken out of context, used only to describe romantic love between two people. But Paul had no intention for them to be used that way. He was writing about love in the context of community. As we heard last week, the Corinthian church had become deeply divided and the members were having trouble getting along. Everything he wrote in this letter was meant to bring them together; to show them how to be unified in their faith. He wanted them to be able to live together well and to honor God and the message of Christ.

In addition, Paul was concerned about their worship. Some people were flaunting their gifts of prophecy or speaking in tongues. Those actions could be meaningful and important. But some were showing off or using their gifts in a harmful way. They were doing those things for the wrong reasons. When done that way, good actions become meaningless; as Paul writes, they become “nothing.” The apostle meant to correct this behavior. And he said the thing that corrects it is love. Love should govern the use of all our gifts; everything we do in worship and in the world.

Paul made it clear that love in the community was pretty similar to those tasks in the poem: love is often mundane and it usually involves some kind of sacrifice. Or as commentator Richard B. Hays writes, “‘love’ is the generic name for specific actions of patient and costly service to others.” Patient and costly service. The purpose of these words was not to determine people’s *beliefs* about Christ. It was to shape their everyday living with one another. Paul never even mentioned Jesus in this passage. Instead, he showed how people who trust in Jesus are called to live.

Patient and costly service can happen in households. But we see those Atlas-like acts of love in our neighborhoods and communities, too, and especially in our church. In the people who have come to remove cobwebs and wash windows as we install the Backyard Playroom; who are lying awake at night trying to figure out how to move that massive wooden climbing structure into our building. The people who are showing up, time and again, with cookies for funeral receptions; giving their Saturday afternoons to ensure grieving families have a space to connect with loved ones. The people who quietly slip out of worship each month to care for babies in the nursery or to teach Sunday school. Those who faithfully lead and attend committee meetings, and follow through on the plans made there. Those who come twice a year for the grounds clean up to trim hydrangeas and bag brush on Saturday mornings. Love is lived in every task, every volunteer hour, every quiet offering of time and energy given.

Now these are not flashy tasks. These are things for which it’s easy to not participate and say, “hopefully somebody else will do that.” Or, it’s easy to do them, while also begrudgingly thinking, “why am I doing this instead of someone else.” But thoughts like those wouldn’t constitute doing the actions

in love. As Paul writes “love doesn’t seek its own advantage. It doesn’t keep a record of complaints...Love puts up with all things, trusts in all things, hopes for all things, endures all things.” [1 Cor 13:5-7, CEB]. Love absolutely puts up with a lot. That makes sense to us. For every loving relationship we have, there are certainly things we endure that drive us bananas, or that even hurt our feelings sometimes, but which we live with because of our love. We have to be clear though, that love does not excuse or overlook *all* things. Paul also says “love rejoices in the truth.” So in times of abuse or inequity or violence, love does not bear or ignore that; love tells the truth about it. Love urges accountability. Love protects those who are vulnerable and calls for reform and reconciliation from those who are doing harm.

The end of this passage shows how the Corinthians, and all of us, are yearning for a time when harmful actions are no longer a concern at all. We believe and press ahead toward the day when God will come to set the world right. Paul says that when that day comes, almost all of the most important and good gifts we share right now, won’t be needed anymore. In the light of God’s goodness, only one thing will endure: love. For now, we need faith to carry us through and hope to point the way. But it’s only love that will continue when God’s kingdom is fully realized.

As we await God’s timing, we try to ground everything in that patient and costly service to others. Because it is only love that can transform the broken and messy world we live in. As Hays writes, “even in the present time, [love] undergirds everything else and gives meaning to an otherwise unintelligible world.”⁴

A month ago in Gaza, love was lived out in this way Paul describes: selflessly, quietly, hopeful, and full of trust. It was love that didn’t try to make sense of the unintelligible and painful world we live in; it was simply love that entered into the fray and made a sacrifice. For the past fourteen years, World Central Kitchen has traveled to disaster zones around the world to feed hungry people. They go where there is war, natural disaster, or community crisis. The Kitchen was started by a world-famous chef, Jose Andres, who thought that when people are hungry, you should send in chefs to feed them, right away. World Central Kitchen has been cooking and feeding people in Gaza for months, where the humanitarian situation and lack of food is dire. On April 1, the Israeli Defense Force erroneously attacked a World Central Kitchen convoy, killing seven of the international aid workers. The IDF has acknowledged their responsibility and fatal errors in the attack.

Though all of the devastation in the region is beyond measure, there was also something particularly jarring and about the deaths of the seven World Central Kitchen team members. These aid workers did not have to be in this war zone. They chose this work, which was selfless, dangerous, and life-giving to others. It could only be done in love and with love.