

BELPRES CHURCH

Persistent Love

1 Corinthians 13

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Well, great to see all of you here, those of you who are in the room today, as well as those of you who are joining us online. Thank you, thank you for being here.

It is a little bit daunting to preach the Sunday after the election, knowing that some people in this room were pleased with the results, some people are sad, maybe even scared of the results. And I'm actually glad that we are a church where we don't all think the same. Actually, I think that's a sign of a healthy church.

And we are doing a sermon series this fall called *Marked by Jesus' Love*. And this is a chance for us to practice that, to say whatever feelings we're having. We're a big community, so there's lots of feelings, and those are okay. Those are okay. And then seek to understand each other, which is really hard to do, I admit, but to seek to understand each other and then love each other across our differences. So that where families and marriages and our entire country are being torn apart by these divisions, we become people who heal those divisions and show the world a better way.

And that's what's going on in the text that we're going to read today from the Apostle Paul, his letter to the church in the city of Corinth. And it's the same text we looked at last week. And it says, "If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but do not have love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal. If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and vote in ways that I think are right, that's in the original Greek, just trust me, I've been to seminary, I know these things. But do not have love, I am nothing. If I give all I possess to the poor and give over my body to hardship that I may boast, but don't have love, I gain nothing."

Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It does not insist on its own way. It is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does

not delight in evil, but it rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. Love never fails.

And that describes a kind of persistent love that perseveres even when people are hard to love. It's a sticky love that perseveres and goes on and on, which I think we all long for. We all want to be loved not just for our best sides, but loved for our worst sides as well, loved in all of who we are.

There's a country music song that kind of gets at this idea. It's a man singing to his ex-girlfriend about his new girlfriend who thinks he's perfect, but he misses his ex because she knew all of his flaws. And he says, *baby, since you left me, there's somebody new. She thinks I'm perfect, I swear. She respects my ambition, thinks I'm talented too, but she's in love with an image time is bound to see through. But you know me better than that. You know the me that gets lazy and fat. How moody I can be, all my insecurities. You've seen me lose all my charm. You know I was raised on a farm. She tells her friends I'm perfect and that I love her cat. Oh, but you know me better than that.*

And I think that song, it gets at a profound truth, as does all country music, by the way. That desire we have to be loved not just for our best, but even at our worst. No matter our mistakes and flaws, no matter even if we disagree with someone, just that desire to be loved for us at our best and at our worst, flaws and all, because that's real love. If you only love me for my best, then I am always wondering, well, what happens when you see my worst? Will you still love me then? It's not really love until you love me, flaws and all, and that's what Jesus does.

The Bible says while we were still sinning, in the middle of our sinning, Jesus died for us to pay the price for those sins. Jesus loves us even at our worst. Jesus loves you even at your worst, and then calls us to be marked with the same kind of love where we love others persistently even when it's hard. That person you disagree with politically. That person at school or at work that drives you crazy. That relative you're dreading to see at Thanksgiving or Christmas. Maybe you're a round-the-clock caregiver with someone you love very deeply, but it's exhausting and it's hard to persist in that love. Jesus calls us to love others we find difficult to love. Flaws and all, or as my wife often says, love me, love my dog. Except we don't have a dog, which might mean that I'm the dog. I don't know.

This text says, love always protects. Always, not sometimes. Love always protects, always hopes, always perseveres. Love never fails. Persistent love that doesn't give up.

Now, as I said last week, the last couple of weeks, this doesn't mean that we allow ourselves to be repeatedly abused in serious ways. We don't do that because that's not good for us or the other person. But in most cases, Jesus calls us to be marked by persistent love.

And this passage answers three questions. What is persistent love? Like, what does that look like? What are the benefits of loving people persistently? Because it's hard, so

what's the payoff? And then third, how do we become people who love others persistently?

So first, what's persistent love? Well, first, let's start with what it is not. It is not about you or me. The text says, "If I give all I possess to the poor and give over my body to hardship, that I may boast, but don't have love, I gain nothing."

In other words, it's possible to act loving, but not actually be loving, because your service is out of some kind of self-interest. We do good things so that people can see us, that we can boast about it, and so that other people think that we are good people. Or we do good things for someone to feel better about ourselves, or we want something in return, and if we don't get it, then we get upset. I did all of this for you, and you didn't even say thank you. Well, who's that about? It's about me, it's about you, right? It's about us. Often, when we get exhausted from loving, it's because we're loving someone with a hidden agenda that's self-interested. And we may not even be aware of it until we don't get it, and then we're upset.

Now, there are some relationships, like marriage and friendship, those should be reciprocal, but there are times where we are called to love people persistently, just focusing on them and not getting anything in return. I remember when my son was around five, I wanted to have some father-son time, and so I decided I would take him to the Museum of Flight in Seattle because he liked planes and trains and automobiles and stuff like that. So I thought he'd love this, we'd have fun, we'd bond as father and son. Later in college, he'd tell his friends about this day and sepia-toned words, right? Talk about how much fun he had and how close he felt to his dad and he'd get little tears in his eyes thinking about how much his dad loved him. You can tell this is not going to end well, right? So I was just sure he'd have fun.

So time came, it was time for us to leave, and I said, let's go, and he said, I don't want to go. I said, I'll go, come on buddy, you're going to have fun. And he said, I don't want to go. I said, get in the car. So we got in the car, we went, we got to the museum, and he said, I don't want to go in. And I said, get out of the car. He started to cry. I said, stop crying. Shockingly, that did not help at all. But I was just sure that once he got inside, he was going to love this experience. So I picked him up, and I was carrying him across the parking lot. He was crying, I was crying, the museum people were crying. So actually, I just turned around. We didn't even go in, I was like, this is hopeless. Because I just turned around and went home. I had such a great plan. What went wrong? It was about me, right? I wanted to create this certain kind of memory with him, right? That was about me. I had not listened to him. I didn't listen to what he would have wanted to do that day. And if we had just stayed home and played catch or Legos, it would have gone much better. But I made it about me. Persistent love ain't about you or me. It's about the other person.

Second, persistent love never quits nor compromises. The Bible's definition of love is not a feeling. It's seeking the best for the other person. That's what biblical love is. And loving unconditionally means that we don't give up on people, but neither do we let them persist in bad or sinful behavior. If we love them, we won't do that because that's not good for them. That's not seeking their best. There is accountability. This passage says love does not delight in evil but rejoices in the truth, which means that instead of quitting on people or compromising, right, we offer, as I've said in the past, grace plus truth plus vision plus time. We give grace to people whose behavior is hurtful or sinful. We tell them hard truths that they need to hear, and we do that in a loving way. Then we cast a vision for who they can be. Hey, man, you've got it in you to be this kind of person. I know you can do it. It's in you. We cast a vision for who they could be, and then we give them time to grow into that. Persistent love is not permissiveness. It's giving some of the people in our lives grace plus truth plus vision, and then the persistent part is time to grow into that. No hit and runs. That's not persistent love.

So that's what persistent love is. What are the benefits? Because it's hard to do. What's the payoff to loving people persistently? What are the benefits? Well, for starters, it changes us, others, and the world. We get to be part of it. If we love persistently through Jesus' power, not our own, we can't do this without Jesus helping us. If we love persistently through Jesus' power, at minimum, we get changed. We become more patient. We become more loving. We become more like Jesus. Our character is shaped. But often, the other person is changed as well. One of the remarkable things about Abraham Lincoln was his ability to love his political opponents, one of which was a guy named Edwin Stanton, who was Lincoln's political opponent, frequently called Lincoln a dumb gorilla. That was like his word for Lincoln. But Lincoln, even though they were political opponents, Lincoln put Stanton in his cabinet and put up with all kinds of flack from Stanton because of it. But Lincoln just kept saying, I don't care what he calls me, I see greatness in him. So that's that vision for someone, right? Well, eventually he turned him into a friend. And at Lincoln's funeral, Stanton stood up and burst into tears, which men in back then in that time, men did not do that publicly.

And he said, this is the greatest leader the world has ever known. That's Lincoln loving a political opponent, someone who voted differently than him, right? It's loving a difficult co-worker since they were in the same cabinet together, and it transformed him. Every story of transformation you hear has one common element, someone loved someone else persistently and didn't give up on them. And then the second benefit to persistent love is beauty and meaning in our lives.

So this past Tuesday, my wife and I celebrated our 30th anniversary, wedding anniversary. 30 on election day. Yay! What a great day, right? Let's watch election returns. 30 years this woman has put up with me, right? I don't deserve 30 years. I don't. I mean, I'm a decent enough husband, and there have been ways and times where I've loved her really well, but there's also been ways and times that I have not loved her, the way Jesus calls me to love her. But she has loved me persistently for 30 years. A while

back, I said to her, you know, thank you that you have not given up on me. Thank you that you have stuck with me, even though I have failed you in some ways, even though you would have had cause to give up on me at various points. And she said, yeah, but we have built a beautiful life together. And that is true. That is true. And on our anniversary, she made an Instagram post, which I didn't know how to do, so I didn't do it. So I felt guilty about it because she did it, and I didn't, but now I can brag about her publicly, which I know how to do that. She made this post, and it simply said, 30 years equals three kids, two states, two churches, plus countless laughs and adventures. Those are just the bullet points of that beautiful life. And there's lots of stuff underneath each bullet point of that beautiful life we've built together because she's stuck with me for 30 years. And in our culture, love is often so transactional. Even the way we do dating now, everyone hates it, right? Do you meet all the things on my little checklist of what I want and desire? And the apps, swipe left, swipe right, like we're buying cereal or something. It's so consumeristic. And we so easily walk away from people when things get really hard. But if we don't love with persistent love, if we don't dance with the ones that, what Brugna, as we said in Eastern Washington, then we're not going to get those beautiful things that can only be built in time. And by working through hard things together and loving each other when we are unlovable, persistent love creates beautiful things.

Which brings me to the third question that this text answers, and that is how. Okay, it's great. It brings beautiful things. Then how? How do we become people who love persistently, especially when someone is difficult to love? Well, first, recognize how hard you are to love. Right, like that's always a good place to start, right? Because the more we remember how hard we can be to love, the easier it is to love someone else who's hard to love, right? So a good prayer for you this week might be something like, Jesus, is it potentially remotely, theoretically possible that I may every so often once in a rare while be a little hard to love? If so, Jesus, show me. Like that might be a good prayer. Because the more we realize how hard we are to love, it's easier to give grace to others.

And then the second way we gain persistent love for others, what we've been saying throughout this entire sermon series this fall, is before love is something you can do, it's got to be a person you've met. Before love is something you do, it has to be someone you've met. This passage says love is patient. In the original Greek, the word is suffers long. Well, who's the best example of suffering long? Jesus, who suffers for us on the cross. This text says that love keeps no records of wrong. That again, describe perfect person, Jesus, who paid the price for our sins on that cross, to erase that record of wrong and our shame and our guilt. If you see this passage as a list of things to do, it's gonna depress you. But if you see it as a description of how you have been loved by Jesus and who we become the more we experience Jesus' love, then it's gonna give you hope. As one of my favorite hymns says, Thou in my youth, in early youth did smile, though I rebellious and perverse meanwhile, Thou hast not left me, though I oft left thee, on to the close, Lord, abide with me. Thou hast not left me, though I oft left thee. Amen, that is so true, and yet he has stuck with me and pursued me, and the more I experience that, the more I'm able to love even difficult people persistently. And our culture is so divided right now, the last thing we need is Christians pouring gas on that fire, and some I fear are.

Instead, our culture needs Christians who try to understand each other as hard as that can be and love each other persistently even when we disagree.

So, action steps for this week are the same two action steps as last week. So first, we can't give love until we experience it. So this week, like last, experience Jesus' love through 1 Corinthians 13. At least three times this week, read through 1 Corinthians 13, and every time that it makes sense to ask this question, it doesn't always, but with each line where it makes sense to ask this question, say, Jesus, how have you loved me in this way? The text says love is patient. Jesus, show me how you've been patient with me. Text says love is kind. Jesus, show me how you've been kind to me, and on and on and on, to help us experience His love. And then second, we have a sticker for you in the lobby, kind of by the sanctuary windows. There's some tables there with some stickers on them, and if you didn't do it last week, you can do it this week. If you did it last week, keep doing this exercise this week, and there's a space for you to write the name of someone you personally know who is difficult for you to love. First name only or just initials. Who is difficult for you to love. Write that if you didn't do it last week. Write it on the sticker. And then today, just put it on the windows there that lead into the sanctuary. So we all can see how many of us are through the power of Jesus, because we can't do this on our own, through prayer and the power of Jesus, are trying to love people that for us are difficult to love. And if you don't have a difficult person in your life, just let us know and we'll assign you someone. Or if you don't have a difficult person in your life, perhaps you're the name that's on those windows out there, and you're giving someone else the opportunity to love you persistently. Last week, we had people who had someone who would take three, four, five of those stickers. You only need to do one, okay?

I recently heard a woman talk about how all through her growing up years, her father was a rageaholic, would scream at her, was very verbally abusive, would say horrible things to her about how she looked, about her intelligence, all kinds of stuff, the entire time she was growing up. And her mom didn't try to stop it at all. And as an adult, through prayer and talking to her pastor and talking to close Christian friends, she was finally able to forgive her parents for that and be able to have a decent relationship with them, visit them, be with them, you know, it was good. And she and her husband went on, they ended up being successful in their careers, made a fair amount of money. And one day she was praying and got a thought that she knew was not her thought, that came from God and it said, you know, your parents are getting older and they don't have good doctors where they live, so you need to ask them if they would like to move to your city. And if they say yes, then you need to buy them a house and take care of them as they get older. And when that thought happened, she said out loud, in the name of Jesus, I rebuke you, Satan. Because she didn't want to do that, right? So she argued with God about it in prayer for months and months. And no, you can't ask me to do that. Argued with God months and months in prayer until eventually she said, I went to my husband hoping he'd say we can't do it. But he said, oh, if that's what God is calling us to, then we should do it.

Right? So she asked her parents, would you want to move to my city and I'll buy you a

house? And they said, yeah, we would like that. So she said, at first, I started out trying to buy them an ugly little house, but her heart's obviously not in this, right? But that didn't work out, so we ended up having to buy them a really nice house, and we pay to have the lawn mowed, and we take them to their doctor's appointments, and we take them to the store, and we just take care of them. And her parents have never once said thank you. Never once. Three years, three years went by, and one day her mother called and said, your dad's been crying for a week, says he wants to see you, can you come over? So she did, and her dad was crying, and he said, I just want to say I'm so sorry for all the ways I hurt you, those horrible things I said to you when you were growing up. I knew it was wrong, but I just for whatever reasons couldn't stop myself, and I've been wanting to say this to you for three years ever since you bought us this house but I haven't been man enough to say it. I'm so sorry. And she said, Dad, I have forgiven you. I did that decades ago, and I know you came from an abusive home as well, and I understand that dynamic. And then she said, would you like to know Jesus and feel his forgiveness? And he said, is that even possible? And she spent the next couple of hours talking to him about Jesus, how he died to pay the price for our sins, how he forgives us, and after those few hours, her dad said, I think I want to follow Jesus. And so they prayed, and he invited Jesus to be his leader and his forgiver, and when they were done, he said, I want you to baptize me. And she was a leader in her church, so a few weeks later, she baptized her father in their church, and when he came up out of the water, he shouted, hallelujah. And from there on, their relationship has been way better, way deeper, way more joyful. Now, she's still hoping for some kind of breakthrough with her mom. That hasn't happened yet, but with her dad, it's really good.

That is a long obedience in the same direction. Decades of choosing to forgive them and visit them and be with them. Decades of doing that and showing her love, and then going above and beyond and buying them a house and blessing them in ways that were really costly to her. That was a long obedience in the same direction, persistently loving people who were difficult for her to love. Now, her path may not be the same as someone else's path in that situation, but in her case, Jesus called her to love persistently in those ways, and the result was a breakthrough with her dad. But even more than that, right? Her character was formed. She understood better how God loved her. She was more patient, and beautiful things happened. Reconciliation with her dad, who she got to baptize. So whose name did you write on that sticker last week? Or whose name are you going to write this week, and put it up on those windows? That God is calling you to persistently love, even as you have been persistently loved by Jesus, even when it's hard. Because Jesus loves you even at your worst. And the world needs people who love each other like this to heal our divided culture, because a divided nation is a weak nation, and we are called to repair it. In Lincoln's words, with malice toward none and charity for all, with firmness in the right as God gives us to see the right, let us bind up our nation's wounds and do all we can to establish a just and a lasting peace. And Bellevue Presbyterian Church, may it be so with us. May it be so with us. Through Jesus, who says, I have loved you with an everlasting love. How long does everlasting last? Forever. And he also says, though the mountains may depart, and the hills be removed, and elections come and go, my steadfast love for you will not be shaken. There is nothing that can cancel Jesus' love

for you. You're gonna have it forever. And his mission to make this earth more like his heaven has never once or never will depend on an election outcome.

It depends on us, his people, participating with him as he establishes kingdom here on earth. He is still at work in your life and in mine, and it's out of that security that we can seek to understand and love others we find difficult to love. Jesus loves you with a persistent, insistent, consistent, relentless, reckless, endless love. There is no mountain he won't scale, no ocean he won't sail, no barrier he won't kick down to get to you. We haven't earned it, we don't deserve it, but he gives it to us anyway. The endless, relentless love of Jesus for you and me to give away in order to heal a world that is longing for love that lasts.

So Jesus, thank you that you have loved us this way. And Lord, we pray that you would help us experience your love more and more so that we are marked by it more and more. Help us to love those people whose names we're going to write on those stickers. Lord, help us to love the people you have put in our lives to love. Help us to be peacemakers and healers here in our own country, starting with us and the people we know. Lord, make us a church that is showing the world your love. We ask this in your name, Jesus. Amen.

Discussion Questions:

Read this week's scripture(s) & answer the below questions with your friends, family, or All In small group.

Opening Question: Looking back to last week's sermon and scripture... How did you live differently or practice what we talked about in your life this week? What did you do and how did it go?

Scripture Reflection Questions: Read this week's scripture together and discuss the following:

- As we read through this same passage again for a second week, are there different things that stand out this week for you?
- How does this passage's descriptions of love compare to how love is understood in our culture?

Sermon Reflection Questions: Reflecting on this week's sermon, discuss the following:

- Looking at the descriptions of perfect love in verses 4-7, in which one of these descriptions are you strongest? In which do you have growth opportunities?
- Talk about a time when someone stubbornly, persistently loved you when you were difficult to love? How did that affect you?

Closing Question and Application: Given what we've discussed together today, how might God want you to apply these learnings to your life or in the life of your community this next week? Who might you share this with?

Closing group prayer: Spend a few minutes together in your group sharing prayer requests and then praying together for each other. Thank God for the time together, the conversation shared, the other people in the group, and for encouragement in the week ahead.