

There's a story from a church about the day kindergarten children were to receive their Bibles. The idea was that as each child received a Bible, he or she was to recite a small Bible verse. When it was little Steve Parker's turn, he froze. He just could not remember his verse. His mother was in the front row ready to prompt him. She gestured and formed the words silently with her lips, but it didn't help. Her little boy's memory was blank. Finally, she leaned forward and whispered the cue, "I am the light of the world." Little Steven beamed. With great feeling and a loud, clear voice, he said, "My mother is the light of the world!"

Today, we're all saying something to that effect. It's Mother's Day! Even though we can't be with extended family today, we're all well aware of the day. Our culture has made a big deal about honoring mothers. No surprise then that it's also turned into a multi-million-dollar industry. Cards, gifts, flowers. I believe I read that the average gift for a mom will be this year because we probably need to add in the cost of postage. The average cost for a Mother's Day gift used to be close to \$200! Who knows what it will be this year?

Do you know how Mother's Day got started? It seems that a lady named Anna Jarvis first suggested this annual day honoring all mothers because she had loved her own mother so dearly. At a memorial service for her mother on May 10, 1908, (exactly 112 year ago!) Miss Jarvis gave a carnation (her mother's favorite flower) to each person who attended. Within the next few years, the idea of a day to honor mothers gained popularity. On May 9, 1914, by an act of Congress, President Woodrow Wilson (a New Jersey boy!) proclaimed the second Sunday in May as Mother's Day.

Mother's Day is certainly not part of the liturgical calendar of the church year, but it certainly seems like a great day to speak about love. After all, ideally, we first experience love in our families—probably from our mothers. I believe all love, but especially the boundless, unconditional love of moms, is an expression of God's love for us. So, the church often uses this opportunity to talk about love today.

There is a lot written about love in the Bible. In fact, the Bible is sometimes called "God's Love Story to People." All the way back in the Old Testament, we hear about God's great love for us human beings. One of my favorite passages is Isaiah 43:4. God says, "You are precious in my sight and honored, and I love you."

Jesus broadened the whole idea of God loving us in John 3:16: "For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son that whoever believes in him might not perish but have everlasting life." And we also may remember the words from Romans 8—that nothing will ever separate us from God's love in Christ Jesus. (vs. 39).

These are great, reassuring passages. They are definitely the Good News of the Gospel message to us. But—it doesn't stop there. We have to **do something** with that knowledge. We have to do something with the love we receive from God. So, Jesus told us to love one another. In John 15:12, Jesus said, "Love one another as I have loved you." The writers of our scripture passages today were reiterating what Jesus has commanded us to do.

Did you know that when God gave us his love, he gave us the most powerful force in the world? Love is not magic, but it can create some fairly magical circumstances.

You may not know this, but the lady who wrote the Harry Potter books may actually have stolen an important idea from the Apostle Paul—sort of! You may not have read any of the Harry Potter books, but I'm sure you're aware of the millions upon millions of books that have been sold. As I'm sure you know, the stories are about a boy wizard, Harry Potter. And while he magically works his way through each tale, the stories are much deeper than wizardry. The real power that drives the Harry Potter stories, and indeed, the whole human story—is love.

At the close of *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*, Professor Dumbledore gives Harry a pearl of wisdom that is the simplest, deepest, and most important insight in all the Harry Potter books. It's this: Love is the greatest power in the world. Despite all the magical forces displayed by the characters in the Potter stories, the most magical force of all is presented as love.

This is where J.K. Rowling (Harry's author) steals the 2000-year-old idea from the Apostle Paul. Paul said the exact same thing at the end of chapter 12 in his first letter to the Corinthians. He says, "and now I will show you a more excellent way." In effect, Paul is saying, "Look, I will now show you something far more powerful." He then writes the greatest hymn on the nature of love in all literature, religious or otherwise:

I Corinthians 13.

When Paul writes of love here in I Corinthians (and elsewhere), he's not talking about sentimentality, romance, or just positive feelings. The Greek language had lots of words for those kinds of love. Paul chooses the one word that goes way beyond feeling—*agape*—love as an act of the will, a choice, a commitment without conditions. To put it another way, love is a choice. And to paraphrase Professor Dumbledore (via St. Paul) it is our choices that define us, not our abilities.

Paul points out that we can have all kinds of spiritual gifts, like speaking in tongues, being prophetic, understanding the mysteries of the universe, and even having rock solid faith all come to nothing without love. Authentic love trumps the power of magic, spiritual gifts, or even death.

I feel sure most of us have heard these lovely words of I Corinthians 13 at weddings. But I believe the ideas of the passage really extend to all human relationships—not just the relationship between a husband and wife. True love (that *agape* love) is not something we hold for ourselves, but something we are to give away freely and extravagantly to others. The section of the passage on love that is patient, kind, never rude, not insisting on its own way, is not the kind of love you can express with flowers or hallmark cards—or even Helzberg diamonds. That kind of love is the day-to-day decision we make to give ourselves away to others—and not just family members, by the way.

Whether you're looking to fight evil and injustice, run a company or a school, pastor a church, answer phones or work on computers, drive a truck, raise a family, be a friend or a colleague, whatever it is we do, remember that love is the deepest force for change. When we act in love, it shapes everything we're able to do.

Love is also the greatest in Paul's mind because it "never ends" (v. 8).

It may be a little difficult to know exactly what Paul means here. We could look at it from the standpoint that the acts of love we do now—the kindness, listening, helping, praying, encouraging—all of it goes forward into the future woven into the fabric of other lives. And in that sense, the love never ends. But also, the love we give and receive from other people—mothers, fathers, children, family members, even good friends, never ends. If they die and are no longer with us, the love which was a central focus of our lives continues. The memories remain, the influence remains, the fact that we have been loved remains a vital part of who and what we are. Love never ends. If mere human love has so powerful and persistent an influence, then what can God's love mean when we come to know it in Christ and respond to it?

What matters in the end is not what we've been able to accomplish in our giftedness, but whom and how we loved. And, what I also believe is that Paul wanted us to know that God's love never ends—that it will always be there for us. And that nothing in this life or the next can ever separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus. In a sense, at the end of life, at the end of time, love will be the one thing left—the love of God for us and our love for each other.

What else do you need to know about love? I think that's it!

Will you pray with me?

Thank you, gracious God, for loving us with an everlasting love. Help us to remember that our loving matters. How we love others has eternal significance. How we love you has eternal significance. May we always remember your great love for us. Help us to love other—not just with words or cards or flowers—but in how we love them—in what we do. We pray this in the name of our Savior who is love incarnate. Amen.