

There's a contradiction in our Scripture lesson this morning that might, at first read, seem kind of confusing. In verse 13 it says that no one else dared join them, the believers, even though they were highly regarded by the people. And in the very next verse it says that nevertheless, more and more men and women believed in the Lord and were added to their number. Those two verses seem at odds with one another. So let's break it down. It's no wonder people, onlookers, outsiders were wary of joining them. Last week, we read the reports from the end of Acts 4 which highlighted the unity of those early believers as they met together. They were of one heart and mind. And to quote Robert Munsch, "they shared, they shared everything!"¹ They pooled their possessions together in order to take care of one another in the gathered community. If there was cash from a sale of property, they brought all of it and contributed to their life together. That's where the reading from last week ended. But between the end of Acts Chapter 4, last week, and the verses we read from Chapter 5 this week, there is the story of Ananias and Sapphira, a husband and wife who were a part of that early gathering. It's a tragic story, often misunderstood and misused. In the end, both Ananias and Sapphira died, not because when they sold their property they didn't give the entire amount to be shared with the other believers but because they pretended that they did give everything. They lied about it. Let's be clear: There was never any rule or law or expectation that the disciples would give all the proceeds of their property to the gathered community; it was just what people did voluntarily. They were motivated by grace, not fear, to generosity. But not Ananias and Sapphira. They kept some back for themselves – no problem with that. However, Ananias misrepresented the facts when he made his offering, and made everyone believe that he was giving it all. And he died. And Sapphira the same. When she was questioned about what Ananias did, she lied for him. And then she died. And news like that gets around. So, when we get to our verses for today, there's a hint of hesitation on the part of the outsiders about joining. And you can understand why. No one else dared join them, even though they were highly regarded by the people. Some are afraid. No one who is just curious, no one who half hearted or of two minds or a poser is going to risk taking a chance on God by coming close to this church. They have seen or heard that God is serious business. And yet, there are others, not so afraid that they aren't willing to take the risk. In other words, even though they were afraid, maybe even very afraid, still they were drawn to Jesus. And their fear couldn't hold them back. It's a beautiful picture of the early church. In fact, in the reading for this morning, we hear this local gathering referred to as the church, ecclesia, for the first time. Previously, this word had been used to describe other assemblies of people, often political in nature, but it is used here in the Book of Acts for the first time to describe the gathering of Christian believers, these disciples. It's a beautiful picture of that early gathering of disciples which we call church, growing despite fear and uncertainty about what it was all about, despite persecution from outside forces like the Jewish authorities, despite living as an oppressed and occupied people under Roman domination. So, what is this force that empowers disciples, that overcomes, overwhelms fear, and that grows the church? Love.

We smile at the beaming bride and groom. Young love, we think to ourselves. So innocent. So Naïve. We hope they can make it last. And so we nod in agreement when we hear those verses from 1 Corinthians 13, read at so many weddings that its become cliché. We could say them in our sleep. There will be days, we think, when they are going to need to remember these verses. Love is patient, love is kind. Love does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It does not dishonor others. It is not self seeking, 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. Great words of advice for any young couple just starting out. But it might come as a surprise to learn that those thoughts and truths about love were not written with young lovers or old marrieds in mind. Paul wrote them for and about the church. And its easy for us to allow these verses to get puffed up into romantic ideals (marriage) or idealistic hopes (church) but Paul wrote these verses not to an imaginary church or a made for Hollywood church but to a real church community, the church meeting in Corinth. The church in Corinth was like every other church: imperfect. They were believers trying to live in community but sometimes old habits, old ways of doing things, personal opinions, personality traits got in the way. In fact, the church in Corinth is a church in conflict and Paul is writing this letter to them to encourage them to work out their differences. And it is work. That is the one thing that church and marriage have in common. It is work. I always say that being married and staying married is the hardest work I have ever done. And it's not because I am married to Kirk. But it is because Kirk is married to me and every day I have to get out of my own way. I have to work to get myself out of the way and work to put someone else before me. That does not come naturally to me. And I know I'm not alone. And Paul has just spent the previous section of his letter to the Corinthians saying this about the church. He is using the example of the church working together as a body: different parts for different functions. They all, each member of the church community, we all have gifts, spiritual gifts, gifts given by God specifically for building up His church. All the gifts are necessary for a body to function well. No one person has all of the gifts. That is why you can't do church or be church on our own. No gift is more important than the other. Some gifts are more visible but none is more important. All the spiritual gifts contribute to a healthy life in community. Trouble brews when some flaunt their gifts as best and others feel inadequate or jealous. So, Paul shifts gears. Rather than pitting one gift against another, he makes the shift away from focusing on the gifts of the spirit to focus on the fruit of the spirit.¹¹ He writes about bearing fruit, as in the way an apple tree bears apples. Disciples also bear fruit. He writes about the fruit that disciples of Jesus Christ bear in his letter to another church, the church in Galatia. In Galatians 5:22-23 "But the fruit of the spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control." In other words, when we are disciples, allowing the Holy Spirit to fill our lives, to give the Holy Spirit free reign in us, these are the fruit we produce: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self control. And so, when Paul is writing to the church in Corinth, this church arguing with one another, in conflict so serious with one another that it has reached Paul's ears hundreds of miles away, Paul shifts the focus away from their petty arguments about who has the best gift of the spirit and invites them to consider working instead on

producing the fruit of the spirit, starting with the very first one: love. In fact, he says it plainly, it does not matter if I have the tongue of angels or the gift of prophesy or if I am so generous that I give everything I have to the poor – it does not matter if I do not love. He does not try tackling all of the fruit here: he begins at the beginning. Love. It's the one way Jesus said that the world would recognize us as his disciples. Jesus said "And by this, they will know that you are my disciples, that you love one another." What attracted those early onlookers to the disciples as they gathered together to form that first church? The way they loved one another. That's where it starts. What does love look like in the church? What does love look like in the lives of the disciples, in the lives of the ones who call themselves followers of Jesus? Paul is not talking about love in an esoteric or airy fairy kind of way. He is not talking about love in general, he is talking about love in specifics. He is talking about love in the church. He is talking about disciples of Jesus. Jesus said that we will be recognized as his disciples by the way we love one another. The outsiders, the onlookers, the curious, the uncertain, the fearful are looking at us to see how we love one another in here. So how do we love one another? What, I wonder, would they see if they looked through our windows this morning? Or, more importantly, what would they see if they saw us during the days of the week because, of course, we are the church all day everyday, not just on Sunday mornings. What would they see at the coffee shop on Monday? Or at the hospital on Wednesday? Or the Ice Palace on Friday night? How do we love one another? Some of you will have heard this many times in your years in the church but none of us have heard it too many times. The original language of the New Testament, Greek, has three principal words meaning love: eros, referring to physical love – where we get the word, erotic, philios, brotherly love or the love between friends, the root of the word Philadeplia – city of brotherly love and agape, selfless, self giving, self denying, unconditional, sacrificial love. It is a love that is not based on what we feel. It is a love not based on how we benefit from it, it is a love not based on dreams and possibilities and flights of fancy. But it is a love that is grounded, a love that shows up in the dirt under one's fingernails and on the sweat of the brow. That is the kind of love that Paul is writing about to the church in 1 Corinthians 13. It's true; that is the kind of love that is demanded of every healthy marriage. Kirk and I tell every couple who come to us for counseling before their wedding and every couple who comes to us for counseling after the wedding that a healthy marriage requires more than 100% commitment. It actually requires a 200% commitment, each person giving 100%. And that is exactly what love, the God who is love, asks of us, his disciples. It's the same love that Paul wrote about in his letter to the Romans, in chapter 12 where he wrote: ⁹ Love must be sincere. Hate what is evil; cling to what is good. ¹⁰ Be devoted to one another in love. Honor one another above yourselves. That's Paul's teaching consistent throughout his letters to the churches he wrote to encourage. Love each other. Be devoted to one another in love. Honor one another above yourselves. Love one another, agape one another - not just the friendly, smile and wave, kind of love. But the kind of loving that asks something of you, that costs you, the kind of love that is not about you.

You know, love, real love, agape love overcomes a lot. I read a story this week of a woman, a Christian, who, though she grew up in the church, had several years ago now given up on the church. For her there were too many past and present problems, too many bad experiences, too many issues, too many areas of disagreement. And then she and her family were invited to a little church in their community for a special service at Easter and what she found there was a love she had been missing in all those years she had stayed away. That's not to say that it was perfect. It was still hard work. But the love that she has found there makes it worth the hard work. Because Love overcomes. When you learn to love like a disciple, you learn to forgive one another, even if forgiveness is hard work. When you love like a disciple, you learn to love the sound of babies crying during the service, even if its hard work. When you love like a disciple, you will listen to that same story over again for the 10th time, even if its hard work. When you love like a disciple, you will smile and shake hands with a heart full of sincerity with the person who is sitting in your seat. When you love like a disciple, you will welcome them because they came this morning, not grumble because they showed up late. When you love like a disciple, you will try new ways of doing things, even if its not your way of doing things. When you love like a disciple, it will be hard work: guaranteed. Relationships are hard work. It will require your 100% commitment, my 100% commitment. There are no shortcuts. You will encourage, listen, speak the truth, celebrate, accept, cry with, show up for, support, work alongside, reach out, take a risk, nurture, make the time, stay connected, not give up on your brothers and sisters in Christ. When you love like a disciple, you will find yourself loving others at the expense of yourself. Because when you love like a disciple, you love like God, not the somewhere up there, out of touch, out of reach deity on high, but a God who dared to come near, to humble himself to become one of us. Jesus, who got his hands dirty and his feet calloused and his back whipped and to felt the blood drip like sweat from his brow as he hung from a cross. When we love one another like He loved us, then the world will know that we are his disciples. When we love one another like He loved us, they will want to be a disciple too.

ⁱ Robert Munsch, *We Share Everything!*

ⁱⁱ Thanks to Brian Peterson for helping me see the shift from gifts of the spirit to fruits of the spirit in 1 Corinthians 12&13. http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=2734