Good morning everyone! I am Pastor Andrew and the oldest members in the Cornerstone ministry team. It's great to have you joining us in this online worship; we would love to hear how God has touched or spoken to you. And if you plan to make notes, send us a picture; or we have prayer ministers who are ready to pray for you at any time while you listening to the message.

I hope you are coping well in this wild and crazy time. This social isolation thing is not easy! If you think that this is heaven for introverts, think again! When our small group had a Zoom meeting last week, one of the members who is an extreme introvert mentioned that it's been pretty rough going!

So if you haven't pulled your hairs out, or if your hairs haven't turned grey, or if you haven't done anything crazy, your dog still runs to you, and you are not taking drugs and in good health, give each other a high five or a fist-pump!

This pandemic has drastically changed everyone's life. Many people are in fear and on edge 24/7: since the beginning of the crisis Google searches about prayer have skyrocketed;

YouVersion – a bible app provided by Life.Church - just reported that more people are searching the Bible for hope and peace, sharing Bible verses and Verse Images with others, and engaging in God's Word with their families. They have seen **more than 1.6 million prayers** added in just the last month.

People of all ages are still processing or dealing with mixed feelings such as anger, self-doubt, frustration, loneliness, fear, depression, and hopelessness.[i] Maybe some of you know exactly what I am talking about here.

Albert Einstein said, "Adversity introduces a man to himself."

If our true character is revealed in adversity, then Cornerstone's Mission – **Making space for Jesus to shape people together in God's love** – remains even more relevant in this present moment. Carpe diem – Seize the day – let us take today as the opportunity to make space for Jesus and re-align our lives with God's purpose.

That's why we set aside what we initially planned and begin a new sermon series, "**Love is** …" - it's based on the Apostle Paul's famous "love poem" in 1 Cor. 13. In the following Sundays, we will unpack this famous "love poem," listen to the Holy Spirit's promptings and respond to Jesus as He "shapes us in God's love" so that we can better share that love with each other, with our community, and with the world in a time such as this.

So let's jump right into today's message.

After Paul teaches on spiritual gifts and church unity in 1C12, he uses the "love poem" in 1C13 to underline the point that love must be the driving force for the exercise of all the gifts of the Holy Spirit, then followed by 1C14 where he instructs the Corinthians how they should use their gifts properly in Christian gathering.

The main message in 1C13 is this:

> **The Christian way of life is love for others over against self-interest.**

In the beginning three verses of his "love poem" Paul writes about the supremacy of love in character development and community transformation:

"If I speak in the tongues of men or of angels, ***but do not have love*, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal. [2] If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have a faith that can move mountains, ***but do not have love***, I am nothing. [3] If I give all I possess to the poor and give over my body to hardship that I may boast, ***but do not have love***, I gain nothing."**

Paul is probably referring to the impressive skills, abilities, and heroic acts practiced by some boastful Corinthians as signs of spiritual maturity; they are …

- *"speaking tongues of men or of angels"* refers to a Spirit-filled, vibrant and invigorating personal prayer-worship life,
- *"the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge" suggests* a unique ability to receive and declare spiritual revelation,

- *"a faith that can move mountain"* points to the exceptional gift to perform signs and wonders,
- *"give all one possesses to the poor"* reflects an charitable generosity,
- *"give over my body to hardship"* indicates an inspiring testimony of self-denying devotion/martyrdom.

But Paul's message is clear: all these remarkable manifestations are "nothing," they are just mere religious trappings, futile and self-serving, if they are not used out of a heart of love for God and others.

Agape-love is not a love of erratic feelings that may come and go. It's not the love of flattering or eloquent words.

What Paul emphasizes here is consistent with what the whole Bible teaches about agape-love, i.e., the highest form of love which is unconditional, sacrificial, self-giving love that is not dependent on the one being loved, but on the commitment of the one acting.

I invite you to read along with me the string of love passages as they appear on screen:

Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love (1Jn. 4:7-8.) ... God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us … God's love has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit (Rom. 5:5, 8.) … Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind … Love your neighbour as yourself (Matt. 22:37-38).

Scriptural teaching is clear and unmistakable: love is the cardinal virtue, the first on the list of the fruit of the Holy Spirit, the centrepiece of Christian values and principles.

Love defines God's character and binds together His holiness, justice, righteousness, wisdom, goodness, faithfulness, trustworthiness, grace, and mercy.

God's love is active, breaks down walls of separation, and reaches out to the whole of creation.

So according to Paul and biblical writers agape-love is …

- **rooted in the character of God the Father,**
- **modeled in the cross-shaped life of Jesus,**
- **poured into us by the enabling of the Holy Spirit,**
- **for the benefit of others.**

We grow – mature – in our knowledge of God when we practice love of God and others.

The most captivating quality of the Christian faith is a loving and worshipping community of Jesus people.

See, Paul is opposing against **a loveless spirituality: a showy display of piety that conceals one's pride and self-interest**.[ii]

There're plenty ugly things in the Corinthian church: disunity and in fighting, comparison and competition between leaders, incest and immorality, lawsuits between members, and worship chaos. Paul is at pain to address all the messy stuffs that are caused by this loveless spirituality.

For Paul, any display of impressive act or extraordinary ability without agape-love dishonours God; it brings more harm than good, and causes relational disharmony.

As NT scholar Gordon Fee has pointed out, "… what is at stake is not the activity without love, but the person himself/herself."[iii]

So here is Paul's double challenge to the Corinthian Christ-followers then and us now:

1. **Don't do the right thing for the wrong reason; love should be the proper motive.**
2. **Guard our integrity: do the right thing in all areas of life, even when no one is watching.**

Paul is adamant about this: Every thought, emotion, act, and speech should be motivated by agape-love, expresses in the right way and at the proper time.

So how can we apply Paul's teaching about agape-love in such time as this?

With the announcement of Ontario State of Emergency being extended into May, it looks like this lockdown and social isolation is going to be longer than we first anticipated.

Because of stress, unresolved issues people ignored, avoided, masked, or denied in the past are now re-surfacing with a vengeance.

Since the beginning of the pandemic we read that there's increase in

> Domestic violence – E,g., NY Times reported on April 6 that domestic violence is rising in China, Italy, France; other news outlets reported that South Africa recorded 90,000 incidents of domestic violence against women in the first week of locked down.
>
> Depression and mental health problems with youth – e.g., a 19 yr. girl in UK committed suicide because she couldn't deal with "her world closing in, plans being cancelled and being stuck inside."[iv]
>
> With anticipation of the negative impact of the pandemic, the Canadian Centre of Substance Use and Addiction website has dedicated a special Covid-19 section [v]

You or one of your family members, or someone you know who is shut-in, on his/her own, might be struggling with any of these issues.

The **1C13 Love-test** is clear: **Every choice we make must be activated by agape-love. Love must shape us along the same lines as the life of Jesus and beyond our culture and ourselves.**

Let me suggest a couple general applications:

1. **Bathe your daily to-do list in agape-love by prayer.**
   Tish Harrison, in her book *Liturgy of the Ordinary*, writes: "God is forming us into a new people. And the place of that formation is in the small moments of today … The crucible of our formation is in the monotony of our daily

routines … It is in the repetitive and the mundane that I begin to learn to love, to listen, to pay attention to God and to those around me."

2. Make "heart-space" for others as God-in-Jesus has made space for us.

I like what **Mother Teresa** once said, "**I am a little pencil in the hand of a writing God who is sending a love letter to the world.**" We are given the privilege and responsibility to be God's pencil in writing His love letter to the world! Make space in your heart to consider how and on whose hearts you can write God's love letter.

I think it's appropriate to close our time together by saying together the prayer of St. Frances Assisi,

Lord, make me an instrument of your peace.

Where there is hatred, let me sow love.

Where there is injury, pardon.

Where there is doubt, faith.

Where there is despair, hope.

Where there is darkness, light.

Where there is sadness, joy.

O Divine Master, grant that I may not so much seek

to be consoled, as to console;

to be understood, as to understand;

to be loved, as to love.

For it is in giving that we receive.

It is in pardoning that we are pardoned,

and it is in dying that we are born to Eternal Life.

Amen.

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[i] **In Italy, a 34-year-old nurse committed suicide after learning she tested positive for the corona virus. She was terrified that she infected others while in the line of duty according to DailyMail.com. In the U.K., a 19-year-old waitress committed suicide over fears of the "mental health impacts" from isolation due to the corona virus, according to The New York Post. A few days before she was found unresponsive, the teen warned relatives that she couldn't deal with "her world closing in, plans being cancelled and being stuck inside" during the corona virus pandemic.**
In the U.S., things have been just as bleak with the New York Post reporting a man with cancer hanging himself in a Manhattan

hospital after he realized he tested positive for the coronavirus. (https://newsone.com/3921332/coronavirus-related-suicides-amid-anxiety/)

[ii] **Gordon Fee, *First Corinthians,* p. 631.**

[iii] **Ibid., p. 627.**

[iv] **https://churchleaders.com/news/374033-social-isolation-domestic-violence-suicide.html?utm_source=outreach-cl-daily-nl&utm_medium=email&utm_content=read-more&utm_campaign=cl-daily-nl&maropost_id=&mpweb=256-8765837-712958667**

[v] **https://www.ccsa.ca/search?field_tags[]=231**