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What Do You See? – 1 Corinthians 13:8-13

You've heard these words many times before. I can't tell you how many times I've spoken them at weddings, even a few memorial services. This is the second half of Paul's famous hymn to love. But love – and especially the love demonstrated for us by Jesus Christ – is far more than human feelings.

Where we're going this morning is where that love really gets to work. Our verse for the year, Jesus' words "Love one another as I have loved you," is empty unless we put some working flesh on those word-bones. Truly, I don't know anyone who doesn't have someone in their life that's difficult to deal with, and my usual response, that you can love someone without liking them, isn't all that helpful: most people tend to forget those words as soon as the conversation ends. They're not easy to actually *do*, put flesh on, live out. Great idea, hard to live.

But God put working flesh on his Word in putting his son, Jesus Christ, on this earth as a human being. Jesus demonstrated in his life over and over what love looks like in the real world, where

people are out to scam you, to manipulate you, to make you do what they want, to hurt or even kill you. Love conquers all – at least God’s love did. And now, it’s up to us to figure out how to show that love in our lives for God, because, as we keep saying, Jesus said: “This is my commandment: love one another as I have loved you,” and as Paul tells us, “Love never fails.”

In the King James Bible, you may recall, Paul’s “love” in this passage is “charity.” Charity *is* another English word for love, although it hasn’t been used that way often for a few hundred years. It comes from the Latin *caritas*, translating Paul’s Greek *agape*, which does mean love. Not the love of desire, physical or even family, but unselfish love of others. Our English usage doesn’t distinguish these subtleties, so it’s easy for us to see love here as, well, love. We use “love” for everything that we like or enjoy, and “charity” has come to mean something different. What does “charity” mean to you? Right. A gift. Giving to someone in need.

Maybe that’s not a bad place to start: do you personally know anyone who doesn’t need more love?

Charity, in our sense, is one of the ways that we put flesh on the word “love.” Giving from the love, the charity God has shown us so that someone else will have what they need, is at least a start. Think of our work with the Green Valley and Amado Food Banks

– one man in our congregation has had his life literally changed by our charity, giving love in the form of our money, food, and his work which has literally worked miracles right in our midst – he’ll be happy to tell you the story of the miraculous multiplication of the milk and eggs, that happened right here, in our area! And that’s just one story among many of lives being changed (it never really ends) by people in our congregation whose lives are being changed (it never really ends) by living out the charity, the love of God.

Now, you can’t always plan the results of your love, any more than you can plan the future. Even though you can count on God’s promises, you can’t choose how or when they will be fulfilled. So a lot of what we do is done, as George Clooney says in the movie, “Gravity,” “in the blind.” Clooney’s astronaut character explains to his partner why he continues to send radio messages to Houston even though they’re getting nothing back: they may hear us, even if we can’t hear them. So, too, we do what we do without knowing what good will come from our doings, like an astronaut broadcasting out into space even though there’s no discernable response, because there’s no way to know if someone is hearing your signal or not.

Even though we may not see, for ourselves, the good we are doing, the differences that are being made in others’ lives: the bellies filled, the pain relieved, the comfort felt, we still are called

to demonstrate God's generous grace. To practice this kind of love.

We're acting, we're praying, we're loving "in the blind," except that we do know that God is listening. "God is working his purpose out," as the old hymn says; we are only rarely given a glimpse of how it's coming to pass.

But back to this hymn of Paul's. There is a wonderful phrase in there that needs to be explored, and I want us to do it together. Would the ushers please hand out the aluminum foil?

Now, while they're doing that, I need to go back once again to the King James and one of those sentences that is lodged deep in all our memories: "Now we see in a glass, darkly."

Beautiful, but what does it mean? Well, some other versions have said in a mirror, or a cracked mirror, or a distorted mirror; that help?

Everybody got their aluminum foil? Great. This is what Paul is referring to: take that foil and try and look at your reflection. You can kind of see it, can't you? But not at all well, right?

In Paul's world, people didn't see themselves very well, literally. A real mirror, like *we* have everywhere, just wasn't available; glassmaking and especially the process of backing the glass to make a clear, undistorted reflection is a pretty new process. Most people, if they ever caught sight of themselves, did

so in the reflection of water, still water. Try it sometime; it works ok, but not great. Or they used a piece of shiny metal, like you have in your hand. The best, of course, were reserved for noble ladies – you know they had to look good!

But how do you look, reflected in your aluminum foil? Even you gentlemen, who only squint in a mirror to shave, want a better look at yourself than you can get in this foil. Hard to even recognize yourself – especially since we know what we look like.

This is what Paul's talking about. That's the reflection he's talking about: that's the view we have not just of the future, but of ourselves. We don't know what we are really like, no matter how well we think we know ourselves, because we cannot see ourselves any better than we can see the future. Nor can we see clearly all that God has given us, or even how we are giving back: sometimes our greatest gifts are those we don't even know we've given.

We can only trust that God sees our true selves as clearly as God sees the future he's got in store for us, that those promises can and will come true.

And so we practice love, we practice charity, we return to God through others what God has, with inexhaustible generosity, given to us. We do what God has told us to do, what Jesus has commanded us to do: love one another. Because we ought to, first of all, and then because we cannot see ourselves, the result of our

actions, or the future, clearly. What we do is put our best face forward, and hope we're better looking to God than we are to ourselves.

Paul ends, "Faith, hope, and love remain. But the greatest of these is love." He means that all our human "stuff," even the gifts God has given us, will come to an end. This is not only what Jesus taught, but a truth that echoes down through Scripture. Yet, after all these things have passed, faith – trust in the promises, in the covenant, the contract God made with us in Jesus Christ; hope – the reality we haven't yet experienced; and love – charity, love for others on God's behalf, making real in others' lives what God has given to us; these are the only things left.

Today, we have a God-given opportunity to show that love, that greatest gift - to put our flesh on the word-bones of faith and hope, and demonstrate love. Look into yourself; what do you see? A person of faith? A person of hope? Someone who knows and wants to show love?

May the eyes of your heart see you as God does, and may your generosity show your true beauty to God's world.