

If you follow the school on Facebook, you may have seen some of this this week in my pastor's post, so if this is a repeat for you, bear with me. Much like children's chat, I start our sermon time in chapel by asking the kids a question. This week in the spirit of Valentine's Day, we read 1 Corinthians 13 with all of its loveyness, but before we dove into that, I asked the kids to tell me what they thought love was. I asked them, if you had to tell someone what love is, what would you say? And as they say...out of the mouths of babes, right?

I had some kids who were a little sarcastic and silly with it. Two words, queso dip. Love is queso dip. I mean I guess you could go love is cheesy but that's a stretch. Love is sleep. So yes, there were jokes, but then there were these answers...love is the exact opposite of hate, love is the opposite of fear, love is hugs, love is kindness, love is putting someone else before yourself, love is God, love is what lets two people connect to one another, love is peace, love is Mom, love is knowing someone likes you for exactly who you are, you don't have to change for them. All of those answer came from our kids. From preschoolers to eighth graders. To them, that is what love is. Of course, I made our teachers chime in too, love is boundless, love is unconditional, love is forgiveness, all incredible answers too, but our kids...their answers were my favorite, because at the end of the

day, more often than not our kids understand life, the world around us far better than we as adults too. They don't over complicate things, they aren't tied up in prejudices and preconceived notions, they don't tend to put caveats on things, they just take the world at face value. You ask them what love is and they're not going to say it's complex or hard to define or messy, they're just going to tell you love is the opposite of fear. Love is kindness. Love is peace. Love is God. They get it, far more than we do, and the sad thing is, is that when we were kids we probably got it too, but through the slings and arrows and complexities of adult life, we've forgotten that basic simplicity of what love is, and who love calls us to be.

So let's get it out there shall we? This isn't a fun gospel. This isn't a gospel we want to hear. This isn't a gospel we want anything to do with really, and honestly, I'm sure Jesus' original audience felt pretty much the exact same way. I mean imagine what we have here. There's Jesus, standing on the plain, surrounded by people who are sick, who know hunger, who know oppression, who know poverty, who know what it is to be forgotten and marginalized, and he has just told them that in the kingdom of God they shall be blessed and thrown a little shade and woe at those who have made their lives so miserable. But then! Surprise! Jesus has more to say. All those folks that are filtering through their heads like yeah, woe to

them! They'll get theirs! See how they like it! Jesus now says, oh btw you have to love them.

To this crowd surrounding Jesus, think of how this had to have rang in their ears. The tax collectors who have overburdened you, taken more than their fair share, and left you with barren cupboards and empty tables, love them. The Romans who police your streets with an iron fist, who oppress you and take away your freedom, who operate with a reign of terror and fear, love them. The Samaritans up north whom you have been told your whole life are separate from God, who don't do anything right, who are unclean and impure, love them. The Gentiles that surround you that you don't understand and judge and critique, love them. The friend that slighted you the other day and it was the straw that broke the camel's back in a long line of tiny cuts into your heart, love them. The family member you have ousted from family gatherings because of some reason no one can even properly put a name to anymore, love them. The person that immediately popped into your head when you heard the word "enemy," love them.

I mean you want to talk about a gospel that was going to get Jesus thrown off a cliff, you would think it would be this one! Because he just doesn't let off the gas pedal. We all know the mental gymnastics we play to try to justify our hearts, our opinions, our feelings, but but but but Jesus!

Have you thought about *this*? I mean think about what they've *done*! And Jesus is like, uh huh and if you continue to hate them what makes you any better than them? The Romans, Samaritans, tax collectors, Gentiles, the dude down the street that ticked you off, they all love the people that love them. Even the most sinful person you can think of loves the people that love them. That's not bold, that's not daring, that's human. To love who loves you, that's not exactly hard, that's not exactly gospel. But to love your enemies...that is bold, that is terrifying, that is a leap of faith, that is hard, and that is gospel living. That is what will mark you as different from the rest of the world you live in. That is what will mark you as mine.

And again, we, being the humans we are, want to find the tiniest, little sliver of getting our way that we can, right? So we're like, ok, Jesus, I'll love them, sure, but just because I love doesn't mean I can't judge them for what they're doing. Love doesn't mean I can't still quietly hold my grudge and not forgive them. Love doesn't mean I can't like condemn them in my head. And you just imagine Jesus being like, "Oh my humans..." and so he continues on, possibly thinking thank goodness I'm doing this in a field not on a mountain this time. "Do not judge, and you will not be judged; do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven." And you know there is someone in that crowd that wants to just

be like, “Oh come on!!! You have to give us something!!!!” But Jesus doesn’t, because at the end of the day, this is kingdom living, this is gospel living. Love not hate. Acceptance not condemnation. Uncritical not judgmental. So what do we do with that?

I’ll be honest, in all of my own deeply fallible humanity, I wish I could say we could ignore it. Maybe Jesus didn’t mean it. I mean let’s face it after almost two years of living through this pandemic which has brought out some of our best, but also some of our worst instincts, where stress levels are astronomical, where all of us have our own opinions, our own feelings, our own thought processes that are constantly coming into conflict with one another, how many of us don’t want just a smidge of room left for, ok maybe not all out hate but at least a little judgment and condemnation? We’re all guilty of it, even if we don’t want to admit it. So again comes the question, what do we do with that?

Number one, we have to give ourselves a break and recognize that there is enough love and grace in the world for all of us because we’re human and we’re going to make a mess of things. Number two, we recognize that love doesn’t mean a lack of accountability and consequences for one’s actions. That’s vital. Number three, love also doesn’t mean like, it doesn’t mean go be best friends with someone, but it does mean recognize

their shared humanity, their equal status with you as a child of God. As beloved as you are to God, they are the same way to God. And ultimately, number four, which is not my own thought, but comes from Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., we must realize that, as he says, “Hate is just as injurious to the person who hates. Like an unchecked cancer, hate corrodes the personality and eats away its vital unity. Hate destroys a man’s sense of values and his objectivity.” He reminds us of the most basic truth that hate does more harm than we could ever comprehend, to others and to ourselves, because at the end of the day, hate isn’t going to make this world better, judgment isn’t going to make the kingdom come, and condemnation is probably just going to circle back to ourselves no matter how good it feels to do it to others in the mean time.

And I get it, we all have those people. The people that get under our skin, the people we feel justified in hating or judging, the people we have been conditioned to develop biases towards. I absolutely get it. But there is a flip side to that truth. The flip side is, we all are God’s people. We all know the power and the joy of being loved, the difference that can make in our lives. We all know what it means to have someone see us for who we are and even when we’re different from each other say, yeah, we’ve got this, we can make this work, you’re you and I’m me, and that’s beautiful.

Ya know, I think we all get a nice little ego boost sometimes from proclaiming our Christianity or our church-going-ness, but at the end of the day, the best way to show our faith is to listen to this gospel. This gospel flies in the face of every single thing this world would tell us to do. This is entirely different from how most people think we should live in the world, and yet that's exactly what Jesus calls us to do. Jesus calls us to flip this world upside-down with our extravagant love and willingness to see people for who they are. It's scary, it's hard, it sometimes feels impossible, but it is life giving, to us and to our siblings.

Of all the answer my kids gave this week, one of my favorites was the love is the opposite of fear. So often that is the thing that gets in our way of loving as God calls us to love. We fear difference, we fear change, we fear not being agreed with, we fear conflict, we fear acceptance, we fear opening our hearts to others. Love casts all of that aside, love makes all of those things not scary, but gifts in their own way. We live in a world where there are a lot of things to be afraid of, but love shouldn't be one of them. Our siblings shouldn't be one of them. Daring to live with gospel boldness in a world that needs a little bit of love shouldn't be one of them. Love finds a way...if we let it. Let the gospel breathe into your heart this week and see if it doesn't help you find a new definition of what love is. **AMEN!!!**