

BLOOM: Healthy Soil
1 Corinthians 13:4-7 (NRSV)
Rev. Melissa Hatfield, First Baptist Church, Jefferson City, MO
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WATCH/LISTEN: www.fbcjc.org/sermon/bloom-healthy-soil

“The health we each bring is key to the health of the relationships we can grow.”

⁴ Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant ⁵ or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; ⁶ it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. ⁷ It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

Spring is here. Thanks be to God! There are several things announcing its most welcomed arrival. Warmer weather. The crack of baseball bats, the chirping of birds, the purr of lawn mowers. The sniffles, coughs, and sneezes of spring allergies. God bless you.

But one of the clearest declarations of spring’s long-awaited arrival is the multitudes snatching up soil and seed and flowers and trees at local nurseries, all with grand hopes that this year will be the best year yet. The flowers will bloom, the veggies will grow, the deer will eat someone else’s hard work.

I am now one of these multitudes. As I’ve shared in previous sermons, last year I built my first garden thanks to the COVID travel ban that kept me home for the first summer in years. The harvest was plentiful and delicious. I only lost a few tomatoes to the neighborhood deer. I learned a lot but have so much more to learn.

In all the Facebook gardening groups I joined and articles I’ve read, there is one repeated word of advice – healthy soil is the lifeblood of your garden. Plants know what they like: rich, dark, organic soil. You can buy the highest quality seeds, water as needed, get everything above ground correct, but if your soil is not healthy, it won’t matter. If you’re facing growing problems, the first place to look is your soil.

The good news is this: even the poorest soils can be improved to foster growth and health. It takes work. It takes time. It takes a great deal of patience and perseverance which is when most of us give up, but it’s possible to change the health of the soil so something beautiful can bloom.

The same is true for our relationships. Relationships are a vital and beautiful part of our lives. We all know the joys and the sorrows of relationships. We’ve experienced the beauty of life-giving relationships and the pain of life-draining relationships. We’ve savored the gift of relationships when they are whole and the ache when they are broken. American novelist Joyce Kilmer once said, *“When people ask what I write about, I tell them: ‘The drama of human relationships.’ I’m not even close to running out of material.”*

The drama of human relationships is a tale as old as time, and it is the motivation behind our text today. These verses in 1 Corinthians 13 are a major part of what is often referred to as the Love chapter. I've shared these verses at more than one wedding as an encouragement and caution to new brides and grooms of the hard work ahead in order to grow a healthy marriage. But the author never intended this to be prose at weddings.

We're actually reading someone else's mail when we read 1 Corinthians and mail the recipients most likely wish had stayed hidden in someone's sock drawer. Let's say you and your siblings weren't getting along, fighting, making poor choices, etc., and somehow tattled to your grandma who lives out of state, and she decided to write a letter to set you straight. Most of us would not want Grandma's letter canonized and read by millions. Yet, here we are, reading and studying Grandma's letter ... or, in this case, the Apostle Paul's letter.

Paul is writing a very young, inexperienced church he helped plant or start about five years earlier in the city of Corinth, a busy and diverse port city in present-day Greece. The church in Corinth was a small community of mostly Gentile believers which means they didn't have a Jewish background to build on. Living as the people of God was brand new to them, and changing how you live and think, especially when it is different than the world around you, isn't easy and doesn't happen overnight. Change is messy and awkward and takes time. I'm still writing 2020 on forms and checks, and we're nearly five months in to 2021.

Paul had stayed with the church in Corinth about 18 months after planting the church, working to build a healthy soil so the new church and the faith could grow, and then, Paul left to go start a new church as he did on multiple occasions. But over the four years that passed, the soil at Corinth had gone bad. There was fighting and confusion and disagreements within the church over how to live out their faith. In all the tension of their differences and trying to learn the core value of God's love, Paul wrote these words about love. This love isn't romantic love or passionate love. It isn't love of emotion or conditions. It is a love of choice. It is Agape love or love that determines it will seek the highest good for others, even our enemies - a love taught to us by Jesus. Since this type of love is not natural in the world of Corinth or in our world, Paul defines it by describing it. He shows us what agape love is by showing how agape love acts. Pastor Scott Sauls describes it this way, "Paul paints a vivid picture of love, that stunning, ever-inspiring catalog of attributes – patience, kindness, humility, generosity of spirit, preferring others, a peaceful demeanor, love for truth, readiness to bear and believe and hope and endure all things. Paul didn't have weddings in mind when he wrote this. This is actually one of the sharpest rebukes in the Bible, because the attributes of love described everything that the Corinthians were not."ⁱ

When the Corinthians heard this part of Paul's letter read aloud, there were most likely some hanging heads and shuffling of feet. When Paul describes what love is and is not, most of the words parallel closely with the behaviors from the church reported to him. If you read other parts of his letter, you'll find Paul discussing moments where they had been envious or boastful, arrogant or shaming; moments where some had insisted on their own way and had rejoiced in wrongdoing. The Corinthians may have been difficult, but they weren't slow. They

would have clearly put two and two together that Paul was implying, not so subtly, that everything about their behavior in Corinth contradicts the character of love. Paul wanted them to understand that the church was not cultivating what it was meant to cultivate because the soil had become unhealthy from a lack of love. And until they fixed the soil, good things will struggle to bloom.

When we aren't sure if our yard or garden soil is healthy, we can do soil testing by purchasing a kit or hiring a professional. A soil test can determine the current fruitfulness and health of your soil by measuring both the acidity level and identifying nutrient deficiencies. This helps you know what you need to add or take away from your soil to create healthy soil.

Perhaps we might consider this passage in 1 Corinthians somewhat of a soil test to help us determine the deficiencies of love in us – not to burden us with guilt for those weaknesses but rather to draw us deeper into dependence on God's transformative work in us. Author Dallas Willard remarks on this passage, saying, "The text doesn't say, 'I do all these wonderful things.' It says love does. And so, 1 Corinthians 13 is in fact a proposition. If you will receive love into your life, over time, out will come the things 1 Corinthians 13 says are true of love." ⁱⁱIf the soil of our hearts is rich in God's love, then agape love for others will bloom. God's love is the organic material our hearts require.

Here are some soil test questions for us as we consider our relationships: Do I treat my spouse with kindness, seeking his or her higher good? Am I patient with my children? Am I slow to judge and quick to listen with people I disagree with? Am I envious of others and their lives, resenting what they have? Do I feel secret gratitude when others fail or struggle? Do I insist things are done my way, and if they aren't, sabotage the efforts or take my toys and go home? Am I known for losing my cool or being easily irritated? Am I a safe place for others? Do I trust God, look for the best, and stay the course with hope?

Only Jesus perfectly mastered and exemplified agape love. We cannot. We are, however, called as followers of Christ to aspire to this type of love, agape love - not through our own efforts but from the overflow of God's love for us. Even the poorest soils can be improved to foster growth and health. It takes work. It takes time, but it's possible to change the health of the soil so something beautiful can bloom. Author Emilie Barnes wrote, "Growth takes time. Be patient. And while you're waiting, pull a weed."

In his book, *Be You. Do Good.* Jonathan Golden tells the storyⁱⁱⁱ of two Rwandans cultivating something new from blood and tear stained soil. Seraphine and Onesphore grew up in the same village in Rwanda. They worked together, growing food, tending to coffee trees, raising children, and going to church together. Then, something changed in the spring of 1994 when lies, vicious propaganda, and conspiracy theories turned the Hutu people against their Tutsi neighbors. At the end of that 100-day genocide, an estimated just under 1 million Tutsi and moderate Hutu Rwandans were dead, and the once fertile soil of Rwanda was tainted with blood and hate. At the end of that genocide, neighbors had slaughtered neighbors, and Onesphore had murdered Seraphine's father and her husband.

After the attack, Seraphine had hid in the stables, day after day, surviving off the grass like the cows once housed there. Eventually, the genocide ended but her grief did not. She said, "I had no man in my life; no one to love and be loved by. My father was gone, my husband was gone, and all the work on the farm was left to me."

Eventually, perpetrators like Onesphore were imprisoned, but then the government suggest they be released to return to the villages to help care for the women who remained after so many men were murdered. Seraphine was asked, "Could you begin to forgive? Could you receive Onesphore again?"

During his time in prison, Onesphore discovered forgiveness through Jesus Christ, but he did not expect it from Seraphine. When he was released and on his return to their village, he wondered if he would be beaten and killed for what he had done. Head hung low as he approached the village, he heard what sounded like singing. Perhaps, he thought, it was shouts of revenge from those about to kill him.

But the singing and shouting was not about revenge. The closer he got, the louder the sound became. Eventually, he recognized it not as shouts for revenge, but songs to a God that sustains and heals and forgives.

Sitting in a circle among the other villagers, Onesphore confessed to murdering several people who'd been known and loved in the village, detailing what he'd done. Onesphore could barely look Seraphine in the eyes, but when he did, he said he did not see hatred. Instead, he saw light. He saw that she was able to forgive him.

Now, he is working on forgiving himself. What helps him, he says, is helping her in any way he can. He shared, "If she needs her crops harvested or a hole in her roof fixed, I like to help. I do for her what her husband and father would have done."

In response to this, Seraphine, who had been quiet, said, "It is still hard, but we work it out little by little in the garden as we work together."

One forgiving the other, one forgiving himself. One learning to trust, the other earning trust. They are doing the work together, tending the soil of their garden and the soil of their relationship so new life can blossom from what once was blood and tear stained soil. It isn't easy. It isn't quick. It is the slow, but it is the rewarding work of agape love.

Rwanda is healing. Life-giving relationships are being cultivated. It is still hard, but they are working it out little by little in the garden as they work together.

God desires health and flourishing in our relationships and the lifeblood of what blooms in those relationships tomorrow is the health of our soil today. While the situations may not be the same, there are things that have died or that are near death within us or between us,

staining the soil of our hearts, making it difficult for relationships to bloom as God intends for them to bloom.

May we allow God's love to seep into the soil of our hearts, working into every inch of our lives, healing the soil of our relationships so good can bloom. And may we – as a community of faith and followers of Jesus - commit to working it out little by little in the garden as we work together.

BENEDICTION:

Go now into the world and cultivate love,
nourished by the love of God,
rooted in the grace of Christ,
planting seeds of goodness through the Holy Spirit.
Amen

ⁱ Sauls, S. (2016). *Befriend: create belonging in an age of judgment, isolation, and fear*. Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, Inc, 21.

ⁱⁱ Wilder, J. (2020). *Renovated: God, Dallas Willard, and the Church That Transforms*. Colorado Springs: NavPress.

ⁱⁱⁱ Golden, J. (2016). *Be You. Do Good. Having the Guts to Pursue What Makes You Come Alive*. Grand Rapids, Baker Books, 127-129.