

**IALAC**  
**February 7, 2010**  
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**Westhampton Congregational Church, UCC**

When I was in Seventh grade my school began a program of self-esteem building. There were lectures, classroom activities, slogans and the like. There were even buttons with the initials I-A-L-A-C on them. I first came across it when my classmate Ralph was wearing an IALAC button. I asked him what it stood for. He told me “I Am Lovable and Capable.” He said it with a weird little smile—like he didn’t really believe it. I am not sure if he doubted it about himself, or if he just thought it was cheesy. In any event, when you are coming of age, it can be easy to doubt your own lovability and capability.

I wish I could say that *after* adolescence it got much easier for each of us to remember that we are lovable and capable. Overall, it might generally, but I think we all have those moments when we doubt it. Sometimes we may do things which cause others to doubt it, too. I remember once as a petulant teen—full of testosterone, and looking for a fight—when I yelled at my mother, Wanda, for no good reason. I was cruel. I was loud. I was totally in the wrong, and I went on for awhile. When I was done venting my vitriol, my mother stood stunned. Tears rolled down her cheeks. She took a breath, composed herself, and said something like “I know that you love me, and that I have stood by you as best I can. You might not feel it right now, but you will some day... and I love you.” And she left me to think it over.

She didn’t give in to the all too common human desire to retaliate. She bore my fury in composed and loving calm, believing through it all that in my heart I really did love her, despite all the evidence to the contrary. She held on to her own lovability, and demonstrated her capability as a parent beautifully. In that moment, my mother modeled a pure and abiding love for me—one quite like that our fellow Disciple Paul was talking about in the reading from Corinthians:

Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.<sup>1</sup>

More often than not, we hear this passage read in weddings. That’s OK, I guess, but it seems to me to miss the real point. I think it is about a deeper and more profound love. On a good day, it might be parental love that Paul is talking about, because some parents are able to love their

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<sup>1</sup> 1 Corinthians 13:4-7.

children unconditionally. But I still think that this morning's passage from Corinthians is about something greater than even the best parental love.

In the first letter to the Corinthians, Paul wrote to motivate an early church to root fully and truly in a transforming love. A love which turns enemies into friends; a love which unites east and west, male and female, gay and hetero, republican and democrat, old and young, the inside and the outside, our clan and the others: and *that is God's love*. Not married love, not familial love, but the ultimate love—the love of God for God's creatures. It is a love we are called to imitate, but one which we may never fully achieve in this life, at least not in every moment.

I see two clues that this passage is actually calling us to imitate God's love, rather than just speaking about some more typical kind of human love. First: Paul writes: "Love never ends."<sup>2</sup> Now, human loves end all the time. The divorce rate is high—about fifty per cent last I heard. So, it can't be married love he is talking about. Also—while families try to love one another unconditionally, not everyone makes it, do they? Many of us have known a family member who was on the outs with the rest of the family—we might have even been one ourselves for our views, or our faith, or our life partners. But Paul says *love never ends*. And unending love is eternal, and therefore God's love.

Here's the second clue: Paul writes: "For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known."<sup>3</sup> Paul lays it out that our lives are somehow incomplete. When we aren't face to face with God, things get distorted, like the images in the beaten copper mirrors of Paul's time. But in those times when we are face to face with God—whether in moments of reverie or holy encounters with other humans—then our love *becomes* divine.

*Then* our love, too, bears all things—just as God's love does always. Then our love, too, is patient in the face of fury. Then our love is kind and welcomes everyone to the table of grace which God sets for every human being. Then each one of us believes, just as God believes always—that we are loveable and capable, because we live into it together. Say it with me now: I am Lovable and Capable (repeat as needed).

Repeat that to yourself whenever you doubt it! Repeat that about others when you have your doubts about them! And remember, God thinks all of us are lovable and capable! Striving to love as God loves transforms and enriches everyone it touches. So embrace it, practice it, live it, and proclaim it!

—Amen?

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<sup>2</sup> 1 Corinthians 13:8

<sup>3</sup> 1 Corinthians 13:12

### **1 Corinthians 13:1-13**

If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. 2And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing.

3If I give away all my possessions, and if I hand over my body so that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing.

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

8Love never ends. But as for prophecies, they will come to an end; as for tongues, they will cease; as for knowledge, it will come to an end. 9For we know only in part, and we prophesy only in part; 10but when the complete comes, the partial will come to an end. 11When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child; when I became an adult, I put an end to childish ways.

12For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known. 13And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love.