A certain mother had four very gifted children. One of her sons had so much athletic ability that he became a NBA basketball player. One of her daughters used her intellectual gifts to become a surgeon. Another son graduated from a service academy and made the military his career, while the youngest daughter owned and operated a successful business. While the mother was pleased with her children’s accomplishments, it pained her that none of them made much of an effort to stay in touch with her. In fact, they hardly acknowledged her. You could say that they were too busy using their gifts to show love for their mom. In her loneliness, the mother once told a friend that she would have preferred to have children who were not so gifted, but loved their mother.

While this mother and her children are fictitious, that family bears a certain resemblance to the way things were going at the church in Corinth. The Corinthian congregation was richly blessed with gifted members. Paul writes at the beginning of this letter: You have been enriched in every way. Prophets, apostles, healers, administrators, tongues-speakers - you name it, Corinth had it. Still, the apostle has to say to them later: In the following directives I have no praise for you. He had no praise for them because, despite their considerable gifts, they lacked love. 1 Corinthians 13 is an eloquent tribute to the basic Christian virtue that Christians then and now too often lack: love. Lest we become so busy using our gifts that we neglect love, Paul reminds us this morning that LOVE IS THE MOST EXCELLENT WAY.

Love is the most excellent way because it is essential, it is practical, and it never fails.

Paul begins by leading us to see how essential love is. He contends that nothing else we do means anything - no matter how exalted it may appear to be - if we lack the critical virtue of love. Paul shows that by using several extreme examples. If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels but do not have love, I have become a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. The Corinthians had what Paul considered to be an inflated estimate of the gift of tongues. God had undeniably enabled some early Christians to speak in languages they had never studied, but Paul says that the use of those miraculous tongues or even the language of angels, is just noise if love is not the motive for speaking in tongues. To employ miraculous tongues as a demonstration of my own giftedness, rather than out of a desire to share the gospel of Jesus, is lovelessness.

Another example: If I have the gift of prophecy and know all the mysteries and have all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to move mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. Here Paul mentions what we call charismatic gifts. Prophecy and the fathoming of mysteries and knowledge all refer to special revelations that God regularly gave to early Christians. Knowledge is a specialized knowledge, given by direct revelation. And faith is what could be called miracle faith, the intense belief that all obstacles, even mountains, will vanish before the power of God to accomplish something that he has specifically promised. Amazing as it may seem, a person could possess all these spiritual gifts and still be nothing when love does not accompany these gifts.

The last example might be the most difficult to imagine: If I give away everything I own, and if I give up my body that I may be burned but do not have love, I gain nothing. We want to ask why anyone would risk poverty and martyrdom if not for love. But Paul’s using extreme examples. If the motivation is not love, then the greatest sacrifices imaginable profit
Paul’s point is this: There is no substitute for love. In the kitchen you may be able to substitute margarine for butter or honey for sugar, but there is no substitute for love. It is still true today. We dare not think we can say: I know I have not always been very kind to others here at church, but I sure know my Bible. Without love, all the Bible knowledge in the world is useless. Nor do we dare to say: I know I have hurt people with what I say, but I am a generous giver of my time and money. Without love, even a fortune given to God means nothing. Nor can we say: I know I have been throwing my weight around in those meetings, but if it were not for me, nothing would get done. In God’s sight, impressive accomplishments lose their luster when they are achieved at the expense of love. Whether we are talking about the home or the congregation or anyplace else, God says we are nothing without love.

So what does the Bible mean when hundreds upon hundreds of times it encourages us to live in love? Love is a word that must give fits to dictionary editors. It means different things to different people. The Greek language is perhaps more precise because it has at least four different words for love. The one Paul chooses is agape. As opposed to passionate love or friendship love, both of which see something attractive in the object of love, agape love is not based on some kind of attraction.

There is something else that’s different. This love is not merely a feeling. It is a deep unity maintained by the will and deliberately strengthened by habit. This sort of love is not something that we have no control over, as if it were a mysterious virus carried around in the breezes. It is intensely practical. We can work at it. We can repent of our failures to love. With the power of God’s gracious forgiveness, we can do a whole range of things that make love grow and refrain from doing a whole other list of things that fray the bonds of love.

Paul demonstrates the practical nature of love when, instead of defining love in the abstract, he gives concrete examples of what love does and does not do. Love is patient. Love is kind. Love does not envy. It does not brag. It is not arrogant. It does not behave indecently. It is not selfish. It is not irritable. It does not keep a record of wrongs. It does not rejoice over unrighteousness but rejoices with the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

Is there at times a lack of love in our homes? We do not need to despair. Things can get better with the Spirit’s help. First we must acknowledge our sins and confess them to God. Then, in the assurance of his forgiveness, we are here directed to do what love does. Even when that is not our natural response, even when it seems that our love is not being returned, even when we do not feel like it, be patient and kind. Turn away from boasting and pride. Refuse to keep a record of wrongs and refuse to cite that record when disagreements arise. Stop asking what is in it for me and begin thinking about how I can put others first. Love is not careless or suspicious or pessimistic or a quitter. Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. And remember as you look at this list: God never asks you to do anything he will not also give you the strength to do.

The pattern for this agape is God himself. His patience would be legendary if it were not also Scriptural. He gives us time to come to faith in his Son and time to repent of our sins. We could not dare to stand in his presence if he were busy tallying all our sins. So instead of keeping a list, he has tossed his records into the depths of the sea. When God looked at sinful humanity, reeking of rebellion and disobedience and selfishness, it is impossible that he should have found anything attractive or admirable in us, but he loved us anyway. The Bible says: God demonstrates his own love for us in this: while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. Revulsion would seem to have come more easily to God than love, given the fact
that humans had ruined his perfect creation, but the Bible tells us that God so loved the world that he gave his one and only son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. When God responded to our predicament of sin and death by giving us Jesus, he defined for all time what love is. This is love, the apostle John says, not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins.

Then there is one more reason why love is the most excellent way. It is stated simply here: Love never comes to an end. Do you remember those battery commercials where all kinds of battery operated toys are lined up and turned on. One by one the batteries wear down and the toys cease to function until only one is running. It is like that with the spiritual gifts that had been given to the Corinthians; the day would come when these gifts would cease. Finally, only love would be left. Love never comes to an end. But if there are prophetic gifts, they will be done away with; if tongues, they will cease; if knowledge, it will be done away with. Tongues and prophecy and knowledge were gifts God distributed to help establish the Christian church during the days of its infancy. The day would come when those gifts would pass into disuse. As Paul says: But when that which is complete has come, that which is partial will be done away with. He compares it to the way our speech and thinking change when we mature. A man, when he becomes a man, puts away childish things. And so the Christian church, when the perfection of heaven comes, will have no more need for spiritual gifts that establish the credibility of God’s servants. We will be in the very presence of God. But there will still be love. Love endures.

Paul can even say that love’s the greatest virtue. Now these three remain: faith, hope, and love - and the greatest of these is love. Faith is being sure of what we hope for, the Bible says, and certain of what we don’t see. You cannot be a Christian without it. Nor can you dispense with hope, because hope is the confident expectation that God will deliver on all those things he has promised for our future. But in heaven we will not have the need for faith or hope anymore because we will be seeing what we hoped for and we will be looking face-to-face at the Savior we believed in. But there will still be love. Love never fails. Love is the most excellent way.

In the me first-ness that comes so naturally to us, in the pressures and strains of the daily grind, in the zeal to be somebody and get something done, we all too often opt for a way that is not most excellent. Sooner or later it catches up with us; the lack of love always does. But it is possible to change and improve. Our heavenly Father showed us the meaning of love when he sent us Jesus. Now he asks - more than that - he equips and enables us to live in love like his. Essential, practical, and enduring, love is the most excellent way. Amen.

Pastor Keith Bilitz
St. John Ev. Lutheran Church, Alma City
Trinity Ev. Lutheran Church, Smiths Mill