ON THE GREATEST OF THESE

A Meditation on Love, Understanding, and the Practice of Being Present

After Saint Paul, First Corinthians, Chapter Thirteen

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An interfaith meditation informed by the Christian teaching of Saint Paul and the mindfulness practices of the Plum Village tradition. The traditions are considered in conversation, not presented as interchangeable.

I. Before the Reading

There are words we encounter so often that we may cease to hear them.

We remember their music. We recognize their place in ceremonies, in vows, in the consolation offered to those who grieve.

We may even know them by heart.

Yet familiarity is not always understanding.

Saint Paul wrote to the Corinthians of spiritual gifts, of knowledge, prophecy, faith, and sacrifice. He spoke of extraordinary capacities—of understanding mysteries and possessing a faith capable of moving mountains.

Then he placed a condition upon them.

Without love, they are insufficient.

It is possible to speak beautifully without speaking kindly.

It is possible to know a great deal without understanding the person standing before us.

It is possible to sacrifice much and still be governed by pride.

It is possible to believe sincerely and yet fail to listen.

And it is possible to possess authority without remembering tenderness.

Before reading these words, perhaps we might allow ourselves a moment of stillness.

Not to prepare a defense of what we already believe.

Not to identify the failures of others.

But to become willing to examine how we ourselves have loved.

We need not hurry.

The words have endured for centuries.

They may be given a few quiet moments of our attention.

II. The Reading

Saint Paul — First Corinthians, Chapter Thirteen

The Holy Bible, World English Bible Updated (WEBU). Public-domain translation.

13

1 If I speak with the languages of men and of angels, but don’t have love,
I have become sounding brass or a clanging cymbal. 2 If I have the gift of
prophecy, and know all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith,
so as to remove mountains, but don’t have love, I am nothing. 3 If I give
away all my goods to feed the poor, and if I give my body to be burned, but
don’t have love, it profits me nothing.

4 Love is patient and is kind. Love doesn’t envy. Love doesn’t brag, is not
proud, 5 doesn’t behave itself inappropriately, doesn’t seek its own way, is
not provoked, takes no account of evil; 6 doesn’t rejoice in unrighteousness,
but rejoices with the truth; 7 bears all things, believes all things, hopes all
things, and endures all things.

8 Love never fails. But where there are prophecies, they will be done
away with. Where there are various languages, they will cease. Where there
is knowledge, it will be done away with. 9 For we know in part and we
prophesy in part; 10 but when that which is complete has come, then that
which is partial will be done away with. 11 When I was a child, I spoke as a
child, I felt as a child, I thought as a child. Now that I have become a man, I
have put away childish things. 12 For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then
face to face. Now I know in part, but then I will know fully, even as I was
also fully known. 13 But now faith, hope, and love remain—these three. The
greatest of these is love.

Source: World English Bible Updated, 1 Corinthians 13.

III. On the Practice of Love

We may read Paul's words as a description of love.

We may also receive them as an invitation to practice.

Love is patient.

But what is patience when another person is speaking?

Perhaps it is the decision not to prepare our answer before they have finished.

Perhaps it is the willingness to hear a familiar complaint once more, recognizing that repetition may arise from suffering that has not yet been understood.

Perhaps it is the ability to remain present when understanding does not come easily.

Love is kind.

But kindness is not merely an agreeable disposition.

It is expressed in what we do.

In the manner of our speech.

In the care we take with another person's dignity.

In the ordinary consideration we extend to someone whose burdens are not visible to us.

A person may be correct and still be unkind.

A person may possess sound judgment and deliver it without compassion.

To practice love is not to abandon truth.

It is to remember that truth must be offered in a manner that recognizes the humanity of those who receive it.

The Plum Village tradition teaches the practice of looking deeply.

Before attempting to relieve another person's suffering, we seek to understand it.

We listen, not merely for the words spoken, but for the fear, grief, longing, or uncertainty that may be present beneath them.

We do not always succeed.

Sometimes we misunderstand.

Sometimes we become impatient.

Sometimes our own anger rises before the other person has finished speaking.

These moments need not become occasions for self-condemnation.

They may become occasions for practice.

We can stop.

We can recognize what has arisen.

We can return to our breathing.

And when we are able, we can begin again.

Love is not demonstrated by never becoming angry.

It is demonstrated, in part, by how we care for our anger so that it does not become an instrument of harm.

Patience can be cultivated.

Kindness can be practiced.

Understanding can grow.

IV. On Love Without Possession

Paul tells us that love does not seek only its own advantage.

There is a particular freedom in this teaching.

We sometimes confuse love with our desire to keep another person close, to preserve their agreement, or to secure their continued affection.

We may believe that because we love someone, we understand what is best for them.

We may become distressed when they choose differently.

Yet another person is not an extension of our wishes.

Their life remains their own.

To love someone does not mean possessing their future.

It means recognizing a human being whose experiences, hopes, and suffering are real, even when those experiences differ from our own.

Here the Christian reflection and the Buddhist practice of nonattachment may illuminate one another.

They do not share every theological foundation, and their teachings should not be flattened into a single doctrine.

Yet both invite serious examination of the difference between love and possessiveness.

Nonattachment, rightly understood, need not mean indifference.

We can love deeply without demanding ownership.

We can care without controlling.

We can accompany another person without insisting that their path become ours.

And we can recognize that allowing someone freedom does not require withdrawing our compassion.

Love need not hold tightly in order to remain present.

V. On the Suffering We Do Not See

It is easy to love an idea of humanity.

It is harder to remain patient with an individual human being.

An ideal does not interrupt us.

An ideal does not misunderstand our intentions.

An ideal does not arrive frightened, exhausted, or angry.

People do.

They come to us carrying histories we may know only in fragments.

They speak from experiences we have not shared.

Sometimes they cannot explain their suffering clearly.

Sometimes they do not know what they need.

And sometimes the manner in which they ask for help makes it difficult for us to recognize the request.

If we are to practice compassion, we must be willing to look beyond the immediate expression of distress.

Anger may conceal fear.

Silence may conceal grief.

Resistance may conceal an experience of having been unheard.

This does not mean that every harmful action is excused by suffering.

Compassion and accountability need not be enemies.

We may recognize a person's pain while still holding them responsible for the pain they cause.

We may establish boundaries without contempt.

We may refuse an action without denying the dignity of the person who proposes it.

We may seek correction without seeking humiliation.

There is a difference between asking what went wrong so that suffering may be prevented and preserving another person's failures so that they may never escape our judgment.

Love does not require the abandonment of memory.

It asks us to examine what we intend to do with what we remember.

Are we preserving a truth so that healing or correction becomes possible?

Or are we preserving an injury because we have become unwilling to imagine anything beyond it?

These are difficult questions.

They deserve patience too.

VI. On Knowing Only in Part

Paul reminds his readers of the limits of human understanding.

We know in part.

We see imperfectly.

What we perceive is not necessarily the whole of what exists.

This is a humbling thought.

We may have studied carefully.

We may have acted conscientiously.

We may possess substantial experience or authority.

Yet there may remain something we have misunderstood.

There may be evidence we have not seen.

There may be suffering we have not recognized.

There may be wisdom in the words of someone we were too hurried to hear.

To acknowledge these possibilities is not to surrender judgment.

It is to practice humility in judgment.

We can act upon the understanding available to us while remaining willing to learn.

We can distinguish what we know from what we suspect.

We can ask for explanation without presuming deceit.

And we can recognize that admitting uncertainty is not the same as abandoning responsibility.

In mindful practice, we return to the present moment because this is where our attention can meet the life before us.

We do not need complete knowledge of the universe to listen to another person.

We do not need to understand every mystery before offering kindness.

We do not need to foresee the future before recognizing that someone is suffering now.

Sometimes the next right action is not grand.

It is to sit beside someone.

To offer water.

To listen.

To acknowledge what we do not know.

To say that we are here.

And to mean it.

VII. On Faith, Hope, and Love

Faith may sustain us when the way ahead is uncertain.

Hope may remind us that suffering need not possess the final word.

Love asks something of us in the present.

It asks how we will speak.

How we will listen.

How we will respond when another person is afraid.

How we will exercise whatever power has been entrusted to us.

And how we will regard those who cannot offer us anything in return.

Faith may inform our understanding of what is possible.

Hope may help us continue.

But love must find expression in the manner of our continuing.

We should be careful not to make love another impossible standard by which to punish ourselves.

We will not always be patient.

We will not always be kind.

We will sometimes fail to understand.

There may be mornings when our thoughts are troubled, afternoons when our tempers are short, and evenings when we remember something we wish we had done differently.

The practice is not to pretend otherwise.

The practice is to recognize what has happened and begin again.

We can apologize.

We can repair what is within our power to repair.

We can learn to listen more deeply.

We can make room for another person's suffering without denying our own.

And we can cultivate the willingness to return to love, even when love requires an effort we had not anticipated.

No one becomes patient merely by admiring patience.

No one becomes compassionate merely by praising compassion.

These qualities must be lived.

VIII. The Bell

Let us imagine, for a moment, the sound of a bell.

Not an alarm.

Not a summons to defend an argument.

Simply an invitation to return.

We may stop what we are doing.

We may allow our shoulders to soften.

We may notice our breathing.

Breathing in, we recognize that we are here.

Breathing out, we remember that others are here with us.

There is nothing we must prove in this moment.

No argument we must win.

No conclusion we must force.

We may simply recognize that life is present.

That suffering exists.

That joy is possible.

That kindness remains within our capacity.

And that love, however imperfectly practiced, is worthy of our attention.

When the bell has faded, we return to our ordinary responsibilities.

There will still be difficult decisions.

There will still be disagreement.

There will still be injustice requiring correction, injury requiring care, and authority requiring examination.

Love does not release us from these responsibilities.

It asks how we will carry them.

With patience where patience is possible.

With courage where courage is necessary.

With truthfulness.

With humility.

With compassion for those who suffer.

And with a willingness to recognize the humanity of those with whom we disagree.

The bell does not resolve the world.

It reminds us how we may return to it.

IX. The Greatest of These

We may spend our lives learning.

We may devote ourselves to service.

We may seek wisdom, justice, peace, and understanding.

These are worthy pursuits.

Yet none relieves us of the ordinary responsibility to love.

The person before us is not merely a problem to solve.

Not merely an argument to answer.

Not merely a duty to discharge.

Not merely a future we have imagined.

They are here.

And so are we.

Perhaps that is where the practice begins.

Not in the extraordinary capacities we hope to possess, but in the care we offer with the capacities we already have.

A listening ear.

A patient answer.

An honest apology.

A hand extended without demand.

A moment of kindness freely given.

Faith.

Hope.

Love.

And of these, Saint Paul tells us, the greatest is love.

May we not be content merely to admire the teaching.

May we learn to practice it.

The bell is invited to sound.

We return to the present moment.

And begin again.

Textual and contemplative notes

Scripture: Saint Paul, First Corinthians 13, *World English Bible Updated* (WEBU), public-domain translation. The biblical text is presented separately from the author's meditation.

Contemplative influence: The reflection draws upon themes in the Plum Village tradition of mindfulness founded by Zen Master Thích Nhất Hạnh, particularly compassionate listening, loving speech, the transformation of suffering, and the cultivation of loving-kindness, compassion, joy, and equanimity.

Interpretive scope: This meditation places Christian scripture and Buddhist contemplative practices in conversation. It does not claim that their theological teachings are identical or that either tradition authorizes the interpretations offered here.