

And how long does this *agape* love of God last? Forever! As Paul succinctly states in today's passage, *Love never ends* (v. 8). When it comes to the love of God for you, there is no expiration date. God's love for you never ends. God's love for you never fails.

Have you heard of the expression "epic fail"? The Urban Dictionary defines "epic fail" as "Complete and total failure when success should have been reasonably easy to attain." "Epic fails" are often quite embarrassing.

- In sports an "epic fail" might be missing a wide open slam dunk or dropping a routine pop fly or missing a twenty yard field goal at a Vikings game.
- At school an "epic fail" might be misspelling the word "cat" in a spelling bee or slipping and falling in the cafeteria with a tray of spaghetti and a glass of chocolate milk.
- At a party an "epic fail" might be inadvertently insulting your host or committing some horrendous *faux pax*.
- An "epic fail" in ministry may be when you're a brand new pastor, and you're giving your very first talk at the very first youth group meeting, and the high school students are cracking up throughout your talk, and you're thinking that your sense of humor is a hit and that you're really connecting with the students, and you're even sensing the anointing of the Holy Spirit in your new ministry... only to have someone point out to you as soon as you're done with your talk that your fly has been open the entire time!

Those kind of "epic fails" can be really funny, but then there are "epic fails" that aren't funny at all: "epic fails" that hurt yourself or hurt others, "epic fails" with high collateral damage and devastating consequences. But in spite of the "epic fails" in our lives, God's love never fails. And God's love never collapses.

Have you ever played the game *Jenga*? It's a game with 54 wooden blocks, stacked together in sets of three for eighteen levels. One at a time you remove a block from anywhere except the top level and place it on top, so that as the stack of blocks gets taller and taller it also becomes increasingly unstable, until eventually it topples over.

Sometimes in our lives things collapse. Sometimes in our lives the higher we try to build our metaphorical stacks of blocks, the more unstable our lives become, until the stack inevitably topples over: a relationship crumbles, a career stalls, a terminal illness is diagnosed, an investment portfolio tanks, a recovering addict reverts to their addiction. In one way or another everybody experiences collapse in their lives.

But in spite of the collapses in your life, the love of God for you never collapses. And in spite of the "epic fails" in your life, the love of God for you never fails. God's love for you never ends.

There was a famous 19th-century author whose life included an impressive list of accomplishments and awards, and also some terrible collapses and epic fails. As a young man this author married a woman with whom both he and his older brother were in love. His older brother was so devastated that after the wedding he had a nervous breakdown from which he never recovered, spending the rest of his life in an institution. This author and his wife had a baby boy, who died as an infant. Later this author was caught in the act of adultery, which severely damaged his marriage and tarnished his reputation. Years later this author's favorite daughter, pregnant at the time, died along with her husband in a boating accident, which cast a shadow over the rest of his life.

And yet in the midst of the collapses and failures of his life, this author experienced the unconditional love of God that never ends. In one of his novels he wrote this: "The ultimate happiness in life is the conviction that one is loved; loved for oneself — better still, loved in spite of oneself."

Late in his life this author wrote an epic novel that includes one episode after another of unconditional love—*agape* love that never fails, never collapses, never ends. The author is Victor Hugo, and his novel, of course, is *Les Miserables*. At one point in the story the main character, Jean Valjean, a former convict whose life had been changed by the unconditional love of a bishop, showed this same unconditional love to Fantine, an unemployed single mom who was terminally ill. Jean Valjean comforted Fantine by assuring her that he would provide for her daughter Cossette. Listen to what Jean Valjean did as Fantine died:

"Jean Valjean leaned his elbow on the bedpost at the head of the bed, his forehead in his hand, and began to contemplate Fantine, motionless and distended. He stayed there in this position, absorbed, silent, and apparently no longer thinking about a thing in this life. There was no longer anything in his face or in his attitude other than a pity beyond words... (He) took Fantine's head in both his hands and arranged it on the pillow the way a mother would do for her child, he did up the ribbon at the neck of her nightgown and tucked her hair gently under her bonnet. That done, he closed her eyes. Fantine's face in that moment seemed strangely luminous. Death is entry into the light everlasting. Fantine's hand was dangling from the bed. Jean Valjean knelt before this hand, gently raised it and kissed it."

Even when your life ends, the love of God for you will continue. At your deathbed Jesus will be present with you, to minister his unconditional love to you, to gently raise your dangling hand with his scarred hand, and kiss it.

The loving presence of Jesus at the end of our life is beautifully reflected in the classic song, “Fire and Rain” from James Taylor’s 1970 album, *Sweet Baby James*. The song includes the following prayer:

*Won’t you look down on me, Jesus, You’ve got to help me make a stand
You’ve just got to see me through another day
My body’s aching and my time is at hand and I won’t make it any other way*

Another music reference: in 1927 the legendary blues guitarist Blind Willie Johnson recorded the song, “In My Time of Dying.” Many years later Bob Dylan recorded a version of it on his 1962 debut album. In 1975 Led Zeppelin covered it on their album, *Physical Graffiti*. Jimmy Page’s epic guitar work makes Zeppelin’s version my personal favorite, as Robert Plant sings:

*In my time of dying, want nobody to mourn
All I want for you to do is take my body home...
Jesus, gonna make up my dyin’ bed...
I know it’s got to be real
Oh, Lord, deliver me
All the wrong I’ve done
You can deliver me, Lord*

In Christ’s death on the cross the Lord indeed delivered us from “all the wrong we’ve done,” or as the Apostle Paul put it, *God proves his love for us in that while we were still sinners Christ died for us* (Romans 5:8).

On the cross Jesus showed us love that “proceeds from a God who is love,” a love marked by “pity beyond words,” love that bears all the collapses and failures of our lives. And Jesus loves you just as much at this very moment. This, then, is the good news of the gospel: God’s love for you never ends.

One last thought: Do you remember what Victor Hugo wrote in his description of Fantine’s death? “Death is entry into the light everlasting.” Well, on Friday May 22, 1885 Victor Hugo died of pneumonia, and apparently Jesus was there in his hour of dying, ministering to him his unconditional love that never ends, for Victor Hugo’s last words were... “I see a new light.” Hugo learned that God’s love never fails. Amen.

God’s Love Never Fails

Sunday, January 17, 2016

The Federated Church, Fergus Falls, MN

1 Corinthians 13:1-13 (*The Message*)

This sermon is about love, so let’s begin with some thoughts about dating/marriage from kids!

- *What do couples do on a first date?* “On the first date, they just tell each other lies and that usually gets them interested enough to go for a second date.” (Martin, age 10)
- *How does someone decide if the person they are dating is the right one to marry?* “No person really decides before they grow up who they’re going to marry. God decides it all way before, and you get to find out later who you’re stuck with.” (Kristen, age 10)
- *How can you tell if two people are married?* “If they yell at the same kids.” (Derrick, age 8)

Today’s text is one of the most famous in the Bible. The thirteenth chapter of Paul’s First Letter to the Corinthians is often read at weddings because the entire chapter is about one thing: love. Which sounds nice, and it makes the bride and groom feel good; but to read 1 Corinthians 13 simply as romantic sentiment limits the passage and diminishes the impact of Paul’s words.

Paul’s intent in this passage is to inform the Corinthian how to live as a community that demonstrates Christ-like love to each other. It’s not just about one-to-one, person-to-person relationships; it’s also about living together in harmony and giving the world a glimpse of what life will be like in God’s Kingdom.

Greek has four words for “love”: *phileo*, which refers to friendship (as in “Philadelphia” the city of brotherly love); *storge*, which refers to the affection among family members (as in a parent to a child); and *eros*, which is romantic love, intimate love. But in this passage Paul uses the Greek word *agape*. *Agape* is unconditional love; it’s love with no ulterior motives, no strings attached, no catch.

The late biblical scholar Leon Morris describes *agape* love this way: *“It is a love for the utterly unworthy, a love that proceeds from a God who is love. It is a love lavished on others without a thought whether they are worthy or not. It proceeds from the nature of the lover, not from any attractiveness in the beloved.”*