

The Love We Need (Summer Saints: The Beatles)

A sermon preached by the Rev. J. Thomas Buchanan on July 12, 2026

Covenant Presbyterian Church

If I speak in the tongues of humans and of angels but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. And 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. If 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.

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; it keeps no record of wrongs; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

Love 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. For we know only in part, and we prophesy only in part, but when the complete comes, the partial will come to an end. When 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. For now, we see only a reflection, as in a mirror, 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. And now faith, hope, and love remain, these three, and the greatest of these is love.
(I Corinthians 13, NRSVue)

On a Sunday night in February 1964, four young men from across the pond walked on to a television stage in New York City, and something in American life seemed to tilt, if only for a moment, toward joy. The country had been carrying a great sorrow. President Kennedy had been assassinated less than three months earlier, and the air still felt heavy with grief and disorientation. Families were gathered around TV sets in living rooms across the country, some still black-and-white, some with the picture flickering a bit, and there they were: John, Paul, George, and Ringo: sharp suits ... quick smiles ... guitars held high ... haircuts that, by the standards of the time, apparently threatened the whole moral order!

An estimated 73 million Americans watched them on *The Ed Sullivan Show* that night. Teenagers leaned forward. Parents tried to understand what on earth was happening – some amused, some alarmed, some captivated despite themselves. The screaming was part of it, of course. The charm was part of it. But beneath all that was the music itself: bright, energetic, full of life and longing and delight.

It's hard now to imagine the freshness of that moment. The Beatles have been with us so long that their coming on to the scene might seem almost inevitable, just taken for granted as part of our modern memory. But they were *not* inevitable. They were four young working-class men from Liverpool, shaped by postwar England, American rock and roll, rhythm and blues, clubs,

radio, ambition, humor, friendship, rivalry, and astonishing talent. Before the world ever knew their names, there were long nights in Hamburg, sets at the Cavern Club, the rough apprenticeship of learning how to hold a room.

Then came the whirlwind: the screaming crowds, the films, the tours, the songs arriving one after another with almost unbelievable speed. So many of those early songs lived in that first bright rush of love: the thrill of attraction, the ache of heartbreak, the desire to be close, the simple wonder of discovering that another person can make the whole world shine ... “I Want to Hold Your Hand” ... “She Loves You” ... “Can’t Buy Me Love.” There’s nothing insignificant about any of that. To “be in love” is one of the first great awakenings of human life.

But the music didn’t remain there. As the Beatles grew, their songs began to make room for still more: loneliness, memory, alienation, spiritual hunger, and the quiet ache of lives passing unnoticed. “Eleanor Rigby” hears the loneliness hidden in plain sight. “Help!” lets need break through the surface of confidence. “In My Life” gathers memory into gratitude. The longing for love remains, but the *meaning* of love grows wider and deeper.

By 1967, when the Beatles represented Britain on the live global TV broadcast *Our World*, the song they offered was “All You Need Is Love.” The program was carried by satellite to hundreds of millions of people across many nations. And there they were, in a world anxious with war, racial struggle, generational upheaval, and suspicion across borders, *still* singing about love!

You know, one might be cynical about a song like that. We can say it’s too simple, too optimistic. And of course, a song can’t heal the nations by itself. A delightful chorus can’t end a war, dismantle racism, reconcile enemies, or bind up all the wounds of history. The Beatles *themselves*, gifted as they were, couldn’t live up to the full beauty of that word they sang about. But then, no one does that.

Still, sometimes a simple song carries a longing that runs deeper, through and beyond its own simplicity. Sometimes a melody gives voice to something we know before we know how to explain it: that without love, all our brilliance and achievement and power come to precious little. So, this morning, in a way, one Paul hands us off to another. Paul McCartney gives us the melody – and the *Apostle* Paul gives us the deeper grammar – of love.

I Corinthians 13 is among the most familiar passages in all of Scripture. We hear it most often at weddings, surrounded by flowers, music, and the hopefulness of two people beginning a life together. And rightly so. A marriage *needs* the patience, kindness, humility, and endurance Paul describes – often before the caterer has even left the building!

But Paul was writing, not to an eager couple, but to a *church*, and not a particularly serene church either. The Corinthians were gifted, energetic, eloquent, and spiritually alive. They were also divided, competitive, status-conscious, and painfully immature. They argued over spiritual gifts, worship, leadership, class and privilege, even over how they shared the Lord’s Supper.

Into that noisy, gifted, fractured community, Paul writes of *Love*. Eloquent speech can sound angelic and still become noise. Spiritual insight can go deep and still leave the heart untouched. Faith can appear strong enough to move mountains and still only serve the self. Even self-sacrifice can become distorted when love is absent from it. Paul is not dismissing any these good gifts. Speech can bless. Knowledge can illuminate. Faith can sustain. Self-sacrifice can serve. But without *Love*, even things beautiful in themselves become hollow. They may impress, accomplish, even look religious. Yet something *essential* is missing.

So yes, Love *is* what we need. But Paul won't let that word float above the hard grain of life. Love is so much more than a feeling that washes over us when the light is right and the music swells. Yes, affection is beautiful, and romance has its own peculiar glory. Genuine warmth toward humanity in general may have a place, too, though it's often far easier than patience with the particular human being sitting across the table.

But Paul gives Love *form*. He gives it *habits*. And so, Love becomes *patience*. Love becomes *kindness*. Love becomes *humility*. Love becomes the refusal to keep a ledger of every injury. Love becomes truthfulness without cruelty, endurance without domination, the strength to seek another's good when ego, fear, resentment, or weariness would rather step in front. He brings Love down to earth, into actual relationships, actual conflicts, actual wounds, actual communities. Love becomes the way Christ's life takes shape among people who might otherwise tear one another apart – with the name of "Jesus" on their lips.

And in ways that surprise even me, the Beatles prove to be such interesting companions for this passage because their music keeps circling around Love without ever exhausting its mystery. Of course, their songs of love start with the universal experience of Love as a longing, a *desire*, to be held, to be wanted, to know happiness and joy with another. Religion has often been suspicious of such human desire, as though every ache in us were only a temptation to be managed, but scripture is wiser than that. The Bible knows we can give our hearts to lesser gods, and it knows that desire can become disordered and destructive. Yet it *also* knows that even our most natural desires may be seen as a kind of homing instinct, a sign of a deeper restlessness for an abundant life as God intends.

We long to love and to be loved because we were *created* by Love! We long for belonging because we were *made* for communion! We long for forgiveness because only forgiveness can heal us. And right now, as Paul says, we see only in part. But Love keeps faith with the wholeness we cannot yet see. It refuses to let the fragment be mistaken for the whole person, the wound for the whole story, the present bondage for the deepest truth. Love looks again, and then again, until dignity comes into view. It listens beneath fear for the life God has not stopped calling good. Some say that Love is blind, but Love is *not* blind. *Love is learning to see*.

Maybe this is why I've loved "Blackbird" so much, for so long, not as a departure from the Beatles' great songs of love, but as one of their deepest fulfillments. The song appears on the 1968 White Album, released only a year after "All You Need Is Love," but the emotional landscape feels different. The bright, global confidence of 1967 had already passed through a

darker valley. In April 1968, Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated in Memphis. Cities burned. The war in Vietnam ground on. The dream of a whole world singing together still lingered, but it now had to pass through grief, anger, and the hard knowledge of what human beings do to one another.

McCartney has said that “Blackbird” was inspired by the courage of Black students facing segregation, especially the “Little Rock Nine.” Those nine students had enrolled in the previously all-white Little Rock Central High School in 1957, entering that building through a gauntlet of hatred while much of the nation watched. And one of them, Elizabeth Eckford, became fixed in the American memory through a photograph in which she walks alone, dignified and vulnerable, while a white crowd presses around her with open contempt.

It’s one thing to sing of love to the world. It’s another thing to let love bend its ear toward a girl walking alone through that crowd. That’s the deeper love of “Blackbird.” The song doesn’t abandon the hope of “All You Need Is Love,” but it carries that hope into a more particular darkness. The love of the earlier song is wide, almost sky-like, cast out over the whole human family. The love in “Blackbird” is closer to the ground. It listens for *one* life ... *one* song ... one wounded courage ... one hidden possibility of freedom.

*Blackbird singing in the dead of night
Take these broken wings and learn to fly
All your life
You were only waiting for this moment to arise*

*Blackbird singing in the dead of night
Take these sunken eyes and learn to see
All your life
You were only waiting for this moment to be free*

It’s closer to the ground, and musically, the song itself seems to know this. As we’ll be reminded shortly, it’s no grand production or swelling anthem. Just a voice, a gentle, haunting guitar ... the delicate sound of a life being addressed with tenderness. It feels almost private, as though encouragement has leaned close enough to whisper. The song doesn’t shout down the darkness. It listens *within* it, and it trusts that even there, some fragile music is rising.

That’s a more mature kind of love. It’s easy enough, at least for a moment, to love humanity in general. Humanity in general doesn’t usually interrupt us at inconvenient times, disagree with us in committee meetings, frighten us with its difference, or ask anything specific from our calendars, wallets, habits, or hearts. Love becomes *real* when it becomes *particular* and *attentive*. When it learns to see the person hidden in the crowd. When it hears the voice others have ignored. When it recognizes the wound without reducing the wounded person to the wound.

And that, I think, is where the Beatles' longing and attentiveness reflects the gospel itself, for true Love is not finally just an ideal or an emotion, nor even the highest human value. Love has a *face*. Love has a *body*. Love carries *wounds*. And for us, that love is known most fully in Jesus Christ, who does not love from a safe distance, but comes all the way down into the life of the world.

This is the Love Paul is describing: patient, truthful, tender, brave. It's the love of Christ poured into the life of the church by the Spirit of God, and so the church does not exist to sentimentalize love. *We exist because the love of God in Christ is looking for a dwelling place in the world*, and if that Love is taking shape in us, it will make us more patient with one another, more truthful about the wounds around us, more attentive to those dwelling in places of loneliness or fear, and more willing to protect the dignity of lives the world has found easy to ignore.

It will teach us to listen for the blackbird: the neighbor made weary by suspicion, the invisible person bearing the deepest loneliness, the elder whose grief has grown quiet because everyone assumes they've already moved on. It will teach us to listen for those who have had to sing in the dark for a very long time.

In a moment, we will hear and join in "All You Need Is Love," and I hope we receive it with joy. It doesn't tell us everything, but it points toward the gift without which everything else becomes noise. Later, during the Offering, we will hear the quieter song, the one listening in the dark for wounded life waiting to arise. And when that first song, then, returns at the end of worship, perhaps we can hear it with even deeper ears.

For Love *is* all we need – to the glory of God! Amen.