



Sermon by: Rev. Robert W. Ater
Text: I Corinthians 13:1-13

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A Place for Love to Land

In celebration of the magazine's fiftieth anniversary in 1983, *Newsweek* went on the search for a "Dream City," a place that they thought reflected well the state of the American Dream at the time. They chose Springfield, Ohio, a small city on Interstate 70 halfway between Columbus, Ohio, and Richmond, Indiana, as the subject for an entire, 160-page special edition. One reporter recently reflected on that special *Newsweek* edition by saying "it's astonishing: not a mere story on the place, but the entire history of America told through the lens of this fascinating little town and five families with varying circumstances – a marvel of journalism and storytelling."¹ The story of Springfield, *Newsweek* hoped was resonant with its broad American audience as it reflected the changing context of life around the country at the time, as many job and work opportunities for the middle class moved away or dried up altogether. Despite these challenges, or perhaps because of them, one contemporary *Newsweek* writer says, that Springfield in 1983 was "a picture-perfect example of Americana, with a thriving middle class and an enduring manufacturing base."² And I would have to say, that I tend to agree. Springfield is my hometown! And at eight years old, I think I must have thought that everyone's hometown was featured in an issue of *Newsweek*.

Times have continued to change for Springfield. A Pew study from about ten years ago reported that "Springfield's middle class had declined more than any other urban area in the U.S. between 2000 and 2014." And last week, Springfield was again thrust, unwittingly this time, onto the national stage during the presidential debate when Former President Trump falsely stated that pets, dogs and cats, were being eaten in Springfield by immigrants. The ruckus over this false claim and the story that ensued, fueled by social media, has drawn attention to Springfield, that it has perhaps never seen. Most notably and concerning last week was the closure of public buildings, public schools, and colleges because of bomb threats, thirty-three by the latest count, and a visit from the Ku Klux Klan – yes they still exist – designed to threaten and intimidate the immigrant community.³ But the story that I hope has gotten out is that the sizable community of immigrants in Springfield, have come legally in the last five to ten years. They've come to escape their native Haiti, described by Amnesty International as having "plunged into a serious humanitarian, political and security crisis after the assassination of its president in 2021."⁴ These Haitian neighbors ran for their very lives and came seeking jobs and a relatively low cost of living, and they also came seeking family, all things that they found in Springfield. And of course, that big influx of new people in a relatively small city is complicated and there are infrastructure and social support challenges. But what is not complicated is the need for Haitian refugees, who've followed their families and loved ones to a small city in Ohio, to find a safe place to land, to live, and to make a new life. What *Newsweek* might even call in a new day, the American Dream.

And so, Springfield's story, indeed our American story, is overlapped today with the story of another community finding its way, the first century community of Corinth.

Today's text from Paul's first letter to the church at Corinth is popular for its poetic words about love, often removed from its historical context to be read at weddings. What I've been known to say to a wedding couple, or two, is that this text is speaking not specifically about the love between two people, but about the kind of love that we are called to nurture together in community. The Biblical scholars tell us that the Corinthians were dealing with struggles, conflict, and worries, not so different from what we face today: "the jockeying of rival groups for control, an indifference to cases of flagrant immorality, and the marginalizing of the community's disadvantaged members."⁵ And so Paul responds to the concerns they are facing by seeking to encourage them in their faith, specifically by reminding them of the spiritual gifts that God has given them, most notably the gift of love, the kind of love that does not insist on its own way, that's not ego-centric but self-giving.

This week, I started a six-session online course with other Presbyterian leaders and pastors being offered by NEXT Church – a network of church folks connecting and supporting one another in the journey of life and faith. Our teacher is the Rev. Dr. Jennifer Harvey, a theologian who has centered her work around dismantling white supremacy values in the church and in society. Some of you may recall that we brought Dr. Harvey to Immanuel five years ago to preach, and to teach us about her just-published book at the time, on how white parents might sensitively and thoughtfully teach their white children about the challenges and pitfalls of racism in our society and communities. Her latest book⁶, the centerpiece of the course I'm taking, focuses on the work that white people are called to in general, not just in raising children, to dismantle racism and help to work for a just world for all God's people. It's important to say that at the heart of Harvey's thesis is a core understanding that there is specific growth and work for white people to do in conversation with one another on this journey. The hope is that in doing this work together, white folks might become better neighbors, friends, colleagues, and partners in the journey to a more just world with our siblings of color. (I realize that I'm just skimming the surface here on an important topic, so please reach out if you'd like to talk more.)

What I found really powerful in Harvey's writing this week, is the way she talks about the journey toward self-understanding and the realization that there is indeed work to do. She compares this experience to grief and the process of letting go of a former understanding of the world while simultaneously seeking to embrace a new one, about the grief white folks face when we begin to realize more and more how complicated and problematic living in a racially unjust community, country, and world can be for our siblings of color. She draws a connection between grief and love and lifts up the words of Buddhist teacher Sharon Salzberg who describes grief as, "love without the usual place to land."⁷ Love without the usual place to land. And so, Dr. Harvey calls the journey of undoing racism and unpacking white supremacy as a call to help love *find* a place to land.

As I've been reflecting this week on my own journey to help dismantle racism and unpack white privilege, as I've been thinking about my hometown and its journey to continue to welcome a new immigrant community while being thrust into the daily national news cycle, and even as I've considered the challenges of that early first century community in Corinth, this idea of love trying to find a place to land as we humans grieve, and struggle, and quarrel with one another really seemed to land in my heart. For I think Paul's call to the Corinthians and to us today, *was* a call and an invitation to help make a place for love to land, to get out of God's way, out of own way, to take down the dividing walls that we put up between ourselves and God and particularly between ourselves and one another. It's a call that transcends the work of racial justice with an invitation to consider love's presence and the work of God's love in our very lives.

Growing up at The Covenant Presbyterian Church in Springfield, I felt God's presence around me in so many ways. It was a place, as I told our new member class last Sunday, where there were adults in my life who I knew loved and cared about me, who weren't my parents, and didn't "have to." That feeling of love provides a strong sense of belonging for a kid and it's at the core of the promises we make as a congregation when we baptize a child, as the congregation promises to support the child and the child's family on behalf of the whole church . . . forever! I was baptized as an infant, confirmed at fourteen, and finally ordained to the ministry of word and sacrament at Covenant Church in Springfield twenty years ago this month, to answer God's call, to answer your call to join you in ministry in this place called Immanuel, which means "God is with us," and it's a place where we continue, together, to make a place for love to land, for one another and for the community around us.

And so, the invitation, dear friends of this timeless letter to the Corinthians and perhaps even from the story of the people of Springfield, Ohio, is to strive to continue to do this important work together.

Here are three things I think we can do:

- 1) Learn to Listen to Listen. This was a lesson I learned in my class with Dr. Harvey this week about the power of really listening to another person, just for the sake of listening. So often, we listen to speak, to consider how we'll respond, how we'll engage, or what connection we'll make. And while this can be helpful in some cases, we also know how important it can be, to listen to listen, particularly in places and seasons in our lives where conflict exists, where perhaps in a fraught election season where there are people we love with whom we passionately disagree. In these situations, especially, the action of listening simply to listen can be liberating, transformative, and loving for both the person speaking and sharing and for the person listening. Deliberately making that effort and even naming this framework can be a way of helping love to land.
- 2) At Immanuel, we can continue to expand and experiment in our life together during this transitional season. We can consider all the ways that we're welcoming new

friends and neighbors and maybe the ways that our practices, not for lack of caring, are not as welcoming as we think they are. Dr. Bush is doing a great job of helping us to explore and consider questions like these . . . things like how we organize the worship bulletin or to considering whether there are some ways that we can explicitly welcome members of the community into our space for non-worship events and offerings . . . like special music, mission, and hospitality events. We need not be afraid to try new things . . . to help make a little more space for love to land in our midst.

- 3) And finally, let's consider Paul's invitation to pursue love, an invitation that he makes in the next chapter of his letter to the Corinthians. Let's consider what that invitation might mean for us today. It's an invitation, I think, to pursue the kind of love in the relationships around us that is patient, kind, and self-giving. The kind of love that tells the truth about God and God's love for all. It's the kind of love that was lifted up at a press conference outside Covenant Presbyterian Church in Springfield last week, hosted by an ecumenical group of clergy, that in the face of lies and falsehoods, told the truth about the new Haitian neighbors they've welcomed with both the joys and the challenges. The group shared one of their plans for pursuing love, for helping make a place for love to land, a new church-based ESL program designed to help address some of the language barriers faced, by providing English language education for the whole family, scaled in a way that works for congregations and works for the new neighbors they've been called to serve. And maybe there will be a few folks who learn a little bit of Haitian Creole, too.

The good news of God's love, of course, is that as we seek to pursue the kind of love that God inspires in us = God's love is always and forever pursuing us. What Paul calls a love that never ends, that transcends time. . . . The famous twentieth century Reformed theologian Karl Barth said this about this kind of love, "It is the future eternal light shining in the present. It therefore needs no change of form. It is that which continues ... for love endures, because it represents the dimension of God that reaches from the future into the present through Christ."⁸ This is what hope is. Love that exists in the future that reaches back to us to say, come on . . .

Let's continue to pursue that kind of love, friends, the kind of love that no matter who we are or where we go, will always find a place to land with us! AMEN.

¹ Borden, Jeremy, accessed at: <https://medium.com/the-untold-story/newsweek-took-stock-of-the-american-dream-in-springfield-ohio-in-1983-e46ee2257ee1>

² Morrow, Darvio, accessed at: <https://www.newsweek.com/springfield-migrants-are-taking-toll-citys-most-vulnerable-opinion-1953385>

³ <https://www.presbyterianmission.org/story/we-didnt-know-what-was-coming-but-god-did/>

⁴ <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2024/03/haiti-crisis-requires-international-condemnation-lasting-solutions/>

⁵ Furnish, Victor Paul. Introduction to First Corinthians. *Harper Collins Study Bible*, New Revised Standard Version, 1993.

⁶ Harvey, Jennifer. *Anti-Racism as Daily Practice: Refuse Shame, Change White Communities, and Help Create a Just World*, 2024.

⁷ *Ibid*, p. 22.

⁸ Holladay, Carl R. *Preaching Through the Christian Year*, Year C, 1994, p. 91.