I recently read an article in the New Yorker by Paul Bloom called *The Root of All Cruelty*. There are many amazing points in the article, which covers our human biology as well as our social behavior throughout our history. One of the main threads of the piece debunks our narrative that people are cruel to one another because of some kind of mistake or misconception. We are cruel because we misunderstand the situation or we have made the mistake of dehumanizing the other person or people. That, we tell ourselves, is how we make the immoral missteps of prejudice, discrimination or even genocide. The authors point out how slave-owners in 19th century America often referred to their slaves as less than human in order to justify enslavement. They highlight how the Nazi’s used propaganda to demonize Jews and to sanitize their murder with words like “correction,” or “election.” They highlight that in our current media we are experiencing some of the same tactics in the debate over undocumented immigrants. Those that favor deportation will come close to calling those immigrants animals and in contrast they will uphold the great value of “the law.” Advocates on the other side are trying desperately to humanize immigrants, telling stories, showing faces of affected children, and more. But the authors also shocked me with this one—they said listen closely to advocates and how they speak about immigration enforcement officers or members of the administration or supporters of deportation and the words “animal” might come from them too.

No matter who you are or what group you are in, this seems to be common, even human nature. It is a naturally human trait to “otherize” people to the point of committed violence against them. It isn’t a mistake that we do it. It isn’t even a moral or ethical failing the author argues. He uses research by anthropologist Alan Fiske and the psychologist Tage Rai.

They explain: “In many instances, violence is neither a cold-blooded solution to a problem nor a failure of inhibition; most of all, it doesn’t entail a blindness to moral considerations. On the contrary, morality is often a motivating force: ‘People are impelled to violence when they feel that to regulate certain social relationships, imposing suffering or death is necessary, natural, legitimate, desirable, condoned, admired, and ethically gratifying.’ Obvious examples include suicide bombings, honor killings, and the torture of prisoners during war, but Fiske and Rai extend the list to gang fights and violence toward intimate partners. For Fiske and Rai, actions
like these often reflect the desire to do the right thing, to exact just vengeance, or to teach someone a lesson.”

We naturally and easily can justify discrimination and violence and feel good about it. In fact, to do so may have been a matter of survival for our early human ancestors. We can call it “greater good,” we can call it “justice,” we can even call it “love.”

So, what does all this have to do with the Bible and Church? Today we are talking about Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians. And the letter is written like it is in response to a lot of questions. But we only have Paul’s answers. We don’t have the questions that the church wrote to ask him. Based on his answers, I think the church in Corinth was doing what the New Yorker article is talking about. They were having a conflict because they were separated into factions, and it is pretty clear that those factions were around matters of inclusion. Who was in and who was out. We don’t know what the factions were- they could have been based on gender, slave/free status, but most likely they were around religious/ethnic background. It was a big debate in the early church whether non-Jews or Gentiles could be part of the Christian church. Because Jesus himself was Jewish and all his early disciples, it was a reasonable argument at the time that his message and his religion was just for Jews. They might have said, “Our church couldn’t apply to Gentiles! They wouldn’t understand it because they don’t know the Jewish scriptures; they aren’t part of the history. It’s better for them to keep them out. It’s really very loving even.”

This is what I think came to Paul in a letter from Corinth. And he wrote this whole beautiful text basically to say “no.” That may be your human nature; that may be your tendency toward tribalism and cruelty; you may have a wonderful justification for exclusion. But Love isn’t that. Don’t call it love because love isn’t that. Paul wrote,

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 or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

Paul said it didn’t matter how you could justify your separation and cruelty to each other, you can’t call it love. So, 1 Corinthians 13 is the original “Love Isn’t” even though most of it is framed in the positive “Love Is,” the context of the letter is a correction. Love isn’t a separation, love isn’t an exclusion. Love isn’t what you thought it was. Just because we preach it at weddings doesn’t mean this text is cliché. This text is a straight up love isn’t challenge.
So in that spirit, this coming year, we are going on a “Love Isn’t” journey, led by our Mission and Social Justice Team. We are going to be thinking about all the sinful and unjust assumptions that we have that try to co-opt the concept of love. And we are going to invite Love to show us exactly what Love Is and what Love Isn’t.

What are the some of the ways that we are falling in to those traps that the church in Corinth was? In what ways are we tribal and otherizing? I was very challenged by Aziz when he was here in Dec and by this article at how easily I and we can dehumanize on our path to justice.

This year we will look at some of our historical and current narratives that have co-opted love. What are some of those narratives? Maybe patriarchy could be one. Telling us that to have love, women need to accept a subservient position. Nope Love Isn’t that. Or Heteronormativity saying that love is only between one man and one woman. Nope Love isn't that. Or white supremacy. Nope Love Isn’t that. Or the idol of America. Love isn’t that. And there are many more. This year is about looking around to see what we might be trying to justify, what might even be in our human nature and saying, “love isn't that.”

What I really love about the contrarian “love isn’t” theme is that it keeps us on our toes. Just when we think we might have love nailed down, nope love isn’t that. It forces us to keep searching and moving on the journey.

As much as we love certainty and as much as the Corinthians were begging Paul for an answer one way or another. Just tell us who is in and who is out and we will know, Paul would not give them a straight answer. Because love isn't that either-love isn't a straight answer. He told them that they were not being loving and they should try to be loving. And even then, even if they tried their utmost, they were going to mess it up. Even then they would have to discern, to self-correct and say, nope love isn’t that.

Paul explained that love has power without certainty:

“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. 9 For we know only in part, and we prophesy only in part; 10 but when the complete comes, the partial will come to an end. 11 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. 12 For now we see in a mirror, dimly,[b] 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. ¹³ And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love.”

Only then will I know fully even as I have been fully known. That is what Love Is and it isn’t coming soon if it arrives at all in this life. We don’t have a handle on it. We don’t have certainty about love because we are not its source and author. We seek that source; we invite that presence. And until we reach what Love truly is, let’s keep going with Love Isn’t That.