

1 Corinthians 13

If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. If I have prophetic powers, and I understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing.

Love is patient and kind; love is not jealous or boastful; it is not arrogant or rude. Love does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice at the wrong, but rejoices in the right. Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

Love never ends; as for prophecies, they will pass away; as for tongues, they will cease; as for knowledge, it will pass away. For our knowledge is imperfect, and our prophecy is imperfect; but when the perfect comes, the imperfect will pass away. When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child; when I became a man, I gave up my childish ways, For now, we see with a mirror dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall understand fully, even as I have been fully understood. So faith, hope, love, abide, these three; but the greatest of these is love. Amen.

Love's Irony

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Rev. Dudley C. Rose

Text: 1 Corinthians 13:1-13

The Apostle Paul is hardly the poster boy for the vocation ministry. What I read in Paul's letters hardly makes church ministry sound like much fun. From what we can tell, in the first century Paul started several congregations around the shores of the Mediterranean Sea – in places like Corinth and Thessalonica and Phillipi. But it seems that in making his circuit among the churches, no sooner had Paul left one church to go to another before things began to fall apart in the place he just left. And nowhere was that more true than in Corinth. In his first letter to the church in Corinth Paul writes to the congregation about the problems that have been reported to him. People from Corinth have brought him news of what is happening back in the church. We learn that another preacher, Apollos, has attempted to steal the congregation and he is dividing loyalties in the church, which threatens to split it down the middle. Some members in the congregation are openly practicing incest. Some congregants are suing one another in the courts of law. Others are fighting each other over what kinds of food should be eaten. There are all kinds of impropriety in worship. Most egregious, some are turning the Lord's Supper into a party. Others in the congregation think they are better than others because they are smarter or more pious or seem to have more spiritual gifts, and they are fighting over which of them are most important: the prophesiers, the speakers in tongues, the teachers, the people who own the buildings in which they are meeting, or the people with leadership titles. Oh my goodness, in comparison to the church in Corinth, North-Prospect Church is a place of sublime peacefulness. I thank God that I have you and not Paul's church in Corinth.

And since we are so different, it may be hard for us to understand, it may be hard for us to benefit from what Paul is trying to teach the Corinthians. But, let's give it a try anyway. As different as we are from the Corinthian Church, I just can't help but wonder if Paul maybe has a word for us this morning.

We join Paul toward the latter part of the letter, at chapter 13, that well-known and beautiful tribute to love. It's words are found in weddings and funerals alike, which gives testimony to not only its beauty, but to its centrality to describing a Christian life. And yet, like so many things that are both well-known and important, there remains opportunity to deepen our understanding of it.

To understand the profound meanings of First Corinthians 13, one must necessarily understand a bit about the two chapters on either side of it.

In chapter 12 Paul is addressing the persistent bragging and jealousy that there is in the community. Some people think they are better or more important than others. Some are smarter. Some seem to have greater mystical prowess. Some contribute more money. Some own the meeting places. Some have titles. Some do more around the church. And apparently the factions are all whispering to each other and about each other. And sometimes it's louder than whispering. Now, I know it's pretty far-fetched to think that anything like this ever happens at

North-Prospect Church, so you'll have to use your imagination. At the church in Corinth there's a lot of murmuring, as Genesis would say.

Paul's answer to the Corinthians is really quite simple. But it's elegant and brilliant, too. Paul says, look, the church is like a body, and a body has many parts, and it needs all its parts to work right. Hear Paul:

¹⁴Indeed, the body does not consist of one member but of many. ¹⁵If the foot would say, "Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body," that would not make it any less a part of the body. ¹⁶And if the ear would say, "Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body," that would not make it any less a part of the body. ¹⁷If the whole body were an eye, where would the hearing be? If the whole body were hearing, where would the sense of smell be? ¹⁸But as it is, God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as he chose. ¹⁹If all were a single member, where would the body be? ²⁰As it is, there are many members, yet one body. ²¹The eye cannot say to the hand, "I have no need of you," nor again the head to the feet, "I have no need of you." ²²On the contrary, the members of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable ... ²⁶If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it.

²⁷Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it. ²⁸And God has appointed in the church first apostles, second prophets, third teachers; then deeds of power, then gifts of healing, forms of assistance, forms of leadership, various kinds of tongues. ²⁹Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Are all teachers? Do all work miracles? ³⁰Do all possess gifts of healing? Do all speak in tongues? Do all interpret? ³¹But strive for the greater gifts. And I will show you a still more excellent way.

In the chapter following First Corinthians 13 Paul makes his point even more clear. Three separate times he says that what is done must be done to build up the community, to build up the church, not individuals, not me, not you, but the whole church. Paul concludes his argument with these words:

⁶What should be done then, my friends? When you come together, each one has a hymn, a lesson, a revelation, a tongue, or an interpretation. Let all things be done for building up [the church].

It is in between these chapters, in between the idea of the many parts of the body and the idea that all things must be done to build up, not tear down, the body, the church, it is in between these that Paul offers the hymn of love as the way to get it all done. According to Paul, love is the only way that anyone can be a true contributor to building up the body of the church. Other things are important, but without love everything else hollow and useless.

If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. If I have prophetic powers, and I understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing.

Now it should be clear that this is not romantic love that Paul is talking about, or at least it's not the kind of infatuation that we mean when we say we are in love. That's why I love to read this passage at weddings and funerals. I wonder how many brides and grooms look into each other's eyes and understand the deep meaning that Paul means, way beyond the throbbing heart? I guess that a lot of the time infatuation wins the day at weddings. But I don't wonder what wins the day at the funeral service. For in gathering up the threads of a life lived and now

painfully gone from us, as we stand face to face with death and loss, we are most often acutely aware that all that has really mattered is our answer to the question, how well have we loved? On that day when we face mortality, ours or that of someone close to us, the job, the honors, the accomplishments all pale in face of the one question: how well have we loved? Oddly, that's why I read it at weddings. My hope is that First Corinthians 13 will convey enough of its full meaning at the wedding so that at the other end of things the grief will be washed in the soothing appraisal that yes, we did love well. And the evidence will be lives lived in building up relationships, not tearing them asunder, lives lived building up the body, not tearing it down.

But of course, these are not words only, or even primarily, for weddings and funerals. According to Paul, the words describe the ways in which we are to be together in our lives, in our communities, not the least, and maybe most especially, the community of the church. According to Paul, the primary business we have in the church, in the body of Christ, is to build up the community that all of us may be edified, that all of us may find God in this place.

And Paul tells us exactly how it works. He tells us exactly what this love looks like. "Love is patient and kind; love is not jealous or boastful; it is not arrogant or rude." Well, these are certainly things that would build up a community, don't you think? – kindness and patience, no jealousy or boasting, no arrogance or rudeness.

Paul goes on, "Love does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful." Oh my goodness, doesn't that sound like the right way to be with each other. Nobody insisting their way or the highway, nobody being nasty or huffy.

And then he says, "[Love] does not rejoice at the wrong, but rejoices in the right." And more, "Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things."

What a place Paul describes. There can hardly be any doubt that if we were all to love in the way that Paul describes, the community, the church and our relationships would certainly be built up, certainly be made stronger, certainly be better. Of that there can be no doubt.

But, I do have one lingering doubt. I want to ask, at what cost? What is the cost of all this loving others, all this patience and kindness, all this not insisting on my own way and bearing all things? All this loving sounds pretty good, but I'm not so sure it holds up under the light of day. At the end of the day, if I do it, all this loving kindness, patience, tolerance and the rest, aren't I going to be a drained, beaten down, wimpy, doormat kind of person? I mean, after all, isn't that the reason I resist doing these things Paul suggests? I'm not willing to sacrifice myself and my happiness so that others and the community can be built up? Hey, there's only so much water in the glass, and if I give it away, then, there's less for me. If I'm lucky enough to have what I need, whether it's money or talent, whether its brains or ability, whether it's luck or hard work that got it for me, why in the world would I want to build up the rest, if it's going to cost me what I've got? Well, maybe if I've got some extra, I'll give it away. If I've got some extra time, or extra money, or extra possessions that I don't need, well, maybe then I'll give some of them.

Well, says Paul, if that works for you, go right ahead. If it really makes you happy, by all means, take care of yourself first, don't worry about being selfish. Make sure you have what you need—things, recognition, anything else—anything you need that will give you your bliss.

But then Paul smiles a little, because he knows that none of it will work. He knows that "If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal." He knows that "If I have prophetic powers, and I understand all mysteries

and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing.” If I have all people’s regard and I have all money and I have all the biggest house and I have all the food in my belly, but have not love, I am not blissful, I am not happy, I am not content, I am not fulfilled, I am nothing, a noisy gong or a clanging symbol.

The secret that Paul wants to let us in on is that love is the only way we ourselves can be built up just as much as it is the only way the church or our relationships or the community can be built up. It’s not a zero sum game. It’s not a glass of water that only goes so far. It’s like one of those nuclear breeder reactors, just much safer and more reliable. Love creates its own fuel. The more of it you give, the more there is and the more of it you have.

“What should be done then, my friends? When you come together, each one has a hymn, a lesson, a revelation, a tongue, or an interpretation. Let all things be done for building up [the church]. And in doing so, watch your blessings, your bliss, increase day by day. Amen.

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