

“The Importance of Love”

1 Corinthians 13:1-13

June 17, 2007

Though most of you have heard our Scripture lesson in the context of a wedding, Paul was addressing something different. That’s not to say it should *not* be used at a wedding; rather, it is to say that you are going to have to work – putting aside all those wedding messages you have heard – in order to hear what Paul saying to the Corinthians.

With that, we turn to our text and look at what Paul describes as “a more excellent way.” Because this is so familiar to so many people, I want us to actually read it together. So, please take the pew Bible and turn to 1 Corinthians 13:1-13.

We are looking at the work of the Holy Spirit in believers. Paul wrote to bringing the Corinthians back to the place where they remembered the foundation of faith: love. Each one who has received Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior has experience love: the love of God expressed in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ for us. Each believer has also received a manifestation of the Holy Spirit for the common good; expressing love for one another just as God expressed love for us through Jesus.

This passage may seem like a digression from the issue of spiritual gifts and how the believers are one body. Actually, it is precisely the point of how the Holy Spirit binds believers together into the body of Christ. The Holy Spirit binds believers together by love. First Paul identifies the necessity of love. Then, he looks at the character of love. Finally, he notes the permanence of love. For a preacher, when Paul gives a clean outline like this to follow, it is probably a good idea to follow it.

1. The Necessity of Love

The Corinthians were a passionate bunch. They were a proud bunch. They were a series of house congregations competing to outdo one another in gifts, in spiritual knowledge, in allegiances to powerful spiritual people. Recall how this section began in Chapter 11 with Paul writing to correct them. He wrote to correct them about how they celebrated the Lord’s Supper; where some rushed in to get “best” places and drink until they were drunk while others waited outside in the atrium hungry and thirsty. Then, he moved on to correct them regarding their points of pride – spiritual gifts and knowledge. In all of his corrections, Paul is pointing out how they are mis-using their gifts – in fact, abusing them – because they are not being exercised for the common good but for personal pride.

Paul’s description of the necessity of love here was not intended to diminish the reality that spiritual gifts are wonderful. Paul affirmed the goodness of the gifts; however, he emphasized that the gifts are to be received and to be utilized for the common good of the body Christ. Spiritual gifts point to the giver, not to the one exercising them. There is no room for pride of place in the body of Christ; all are a part of the body because of the grace they have received.

In reminding the Corinthians about the purpose of the gifts, Paul started with the gift that some of the Corinthians valued most: speaking in tongues. You can see how this happened, right? Christmas morning, after opening presents, all the kids run outside to see who has the coolest one? Speaking in tongues is a cool gift. In the midst of worship, all of a sudden, your mouth is moving in excited utterance in a language that your parents did not teach you. It is a very visible, observable thing. The problem is not the gift; the problem comes when the one who received the cool gift believes that *they* are cool because of the gift.

Paul's followup is true: when kids think they are cool because they have received a cool gift, it does not take long for others to resent them, reject them, and distance themselves. Seeking status through a gift is a form of combined idolatry – self-idolatry and idolatry of the gift – and it turns out to be a lonely road to follow. When the gift of tongues becomes an idol, the noise is like a noisy gong or clanging cymbal.

Likewise prophesy and knowledge: we all know smart people. We all know insightful people. There are two kinds: there are the kinds of smart and insightful people who are generous with their time and gracious with their counsel; and there are smart and insightful people who seem to act as if everyone else were burden they have to bear. Previously, in chapter 8 of this letter to the Corinthians, Paul has said, “Knowledge puffs up, love builds up.” Puffing up has the notion of being like a cloud – appearance without substance. Building up has the sense of substance.

Growing up, I remember a baseball coach whose name was Art Marple. He was kind of a local celebrity, the morning radio host on WCOJ. Whenever snow was forecast or had fallen, we all tuned in to hear whether school would be delayed or cancelled. He always had people coming to talk with him. He was the coach of our team; and I remember him taking me aside – as he did with each of us – and teaching us some of the mental part of the game. At the end of these one-on-one moments, he would look us in the eye and say, “You can do this; so, go and have some fun with it.” You walked away feeling more confident in what you were doing – and affirmed that you were valuable and, yes, loved. Knowledge puffs up, love builds up.

Likewise giving and reputation: Paul uses the hypothetical illustration of giving away all his goods; then, even submitting his own body to be burned. He says, “If I do it to boast” (or “for my glory” is perhaps a better translation), “but do not have love, I gain nothing.” Other variant readings of this same text eliminate the “gain” so that Paul's point is, “If I do it for my glory, but do not have love, I *am* nothing.”

I have been a part of – and served – enough congregations to recognize the people who want to make sure that others know all the things they are doing for the church. The problem is when people consider themselves indispensable, they often cause more damage to the body than good. When they “save” the congregation, they either perpetuate something the church should not be doing or prevent someone else from exercising their gifts for the common good. In other words, if Bob Davis has let everyone know how much

he does and everyone knows that Bob Davis is going to do everything for the church, then no one else is needed. We'll just let him do it. Then, the Elijah syndrome sets in, "Lord, I and I alone am left. The rest have abandoned you!"

Some of you may be thinking, "Is he saying that we should do less?" That would be, "no." I am not saying that at all; *how much* you do or how much you give is a different issue. What I am saying is that what we give is not a tool to fight for status among ourselves in the body of Christ. We are *all* valued and we are *all* gifted by the Holy Spirit for the common good. For some, acting with love means letting go of trying to earn God's favor and achieving status among the rest; for others, acting with love means letting go of our fear and jumping in to help build up the rest. "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 am nothing."

Those are the gifts Paul mentions, but there are other status/idol traps, too. Church buildings are a good one. How often does the church building become synonymous with "the church?" Church buildings are tools for ministry and building up the body of Christ; they do not live, they do not love. The church is the body of believers who gathers to praise God, not the physical building in which the people gather. Again, buildings are not bad – the attitude about building becomes bad when it is more important than the proclamation of the gospel to the lost, the lonely, the searching, the needy.

Paul is saying to the Corinthians: love is not an option to add to the gifts; love is the character necessary to express those gifts.

2. The Character of Love

He then moves to the character of love, which includes the passages that most people know and warm to hearing. It is interesting to note how these things are the antithesis of how the Corinthians were treating each other: love is patient, love is kind, love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. For what it is worth, these passive translations in English do not do justice to the active quality of Paul's words: love manifests ongoing patience; love expresses kindness. Love moves. It acts. It is the invisible stuff of relationships binding us together.

All of this talk about love may sound like a vapid greeting card if you have not already received Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior. If you do not know Jesus, you are stuck with the world. However, the world does not understand love. The world treats love as a commodity to be consumed, a goal to be achieved, as a feeling to desire. It packages love in pop songs that are sweet when we first hear them, but we quickly tire of them and move on in search of the next one.

Love is more than a feeling, more than a motivating factor. Feelings and desires have more to do with us than the expression of behavior towards the other. Love is focused on the other. In fact, when we love, we are self-less: it is about giving to give, not in order to receive. Paul is telling the Corinthians to expend their gifts in love to make the body of Christ better rather than worrying about what they are getting from it.

Clearly, Paul is thinking about the example of Christ as the ultimate expression of love. Jesus did not insist on his own way; it just was. Jesus was not irritable or resentful, he came as a servant to give his life a ransom for many. Jesus did not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoiced in the truth.

Why does love seem difficult? It seems difficult because it is not easy. Love is how God deals with us, and God tells us this in Isaiah 55:: “For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways,” declares the Lord. “As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.

God’s ways are in perfect love, God’s thoughts express perfect love. For us, love takes conscious effort, takes discipline, takes vulnerability.

We must intentionally choose to be loving. We have to run a check on ourselves and with each other to encourage one another to act in love. Jesus’ walk to the cross required conscious effort, “Lord, if there is any way to let this cup pass; nonetheless, not my will but your will be done.” That is the measure of love – the willingness to lay down your life for another. It takes an intentional decision.

Living a loving life takes discipline. Jesus’ great commission included this, “teach them to obey everything I have commanded.” Discipleship involves discipline. It involves putting on the clothes of a Christian when the world invites you to other things. Discipleship involves devotion; discipleship involves expressing the love you have for the one who first loved you.

Living a loving life takes the willingness to be vulnerable. You will get hurt. People will do you wrong. However, those hurts are neither a reason to not be loving, nor are they a reason to feel better about yourself because the awful truth is: you will hurt others, you have done others wrong. Instead of overlooking our own faults and holding wrongs against others, love means confessing and repenting from own faults and not holding others’ wrongs against them.

The character of love is not a vapid greeting card; it is the outgrowth of the love expressed by God towards us through Jesus Christ in the power of the Holy Spirit. The work of the Holy Spirit in love means we are growing as children of God in the kingdom of God.

3. The Permanence of Love

Paul concludes his discussion of love with a look towards the ultimate realization of the kingdom of God. Love does not fail, or is never defeated, or does not become invalid. It is eternal. Other things are limited.

Being in the midst of graduation season – and having attending one of our own – we have heard a lot about accomplishments and achievements. They are important to note. Yet the reality is that when Kaley remembers her friends and teachers from high school, it is

unlikely that she will think of them in terms of their academic achievements. If she remembers those things, it will only be in passing. Instead, she will remember them for the character of their friendships – how they loved one another – expressed in their relationship together. Love is the only thing of lasting value.

It is the same with congregations. The programs and missions and worship services and music do not have lasting value in their own right. Most sermons are difficult to remember that same afternoon. But the experience of love is lasting. An awful lot of miscues, hurts, and offenses can be forgiven and forgotten if the primary connection among people is love.

The work of the Holy Spirit grows us individually and corporately to become the children of God we were created to be. The here and now is not all there is.; yet loving here and now is what we are called to do. Love is not static, it does not stand still. There is a direction, there is a goal, there is a purpose for love.

For the Corinthians, this is an important word: all the things they were using to judge one another and distance themselves from one another will disappear. The Holy Spirit did not give them gifts so that they would become superstars here; the Spirit allotted the gifts for the building up of the body of Christ in eternity. They – and we – are children of the king of heaven; the only one who is truly worthy of our worship and praise. Individually and collectively, we are to grow up to be the children of God he created us to be; glorifying him and enjoying him – forever. Forever. God’s love is forever. Not just for a day, for a season, for a lifetime here on earth; God’s love is forever.

To sum up: Paul wrote to the Corinthians to put love between them – which would bind them together – and do not put the gifts between them. The gifts are to build up the body in worship and praise of God who gives the gifts through the Holy Spirit; the gifts are expressed in love, just as God loves. We love in hope because we are growing to the place where we will see fully what we see now only in a mirror dimly.

In short, love is the manifestation of the presence of the Holy Spirit, moving and working in us to draw us together, moving and working in us to give us gifts to share, moving and working in us to reach out (even as God has reached out to us). Love is the fire by which the Holy Spirit purifies us, strengthens us, and shapes us into the children of God we are intended to be.

Conclusion

Love one another, even as Christ loved you. Love one another patiently, kindly, truthfully, hopefully, persistently. Let the Holy Spirit move you to give what has been allotted you for the common good, giving it in love. Let this congregation become known for sharing Christ’s love.

And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

8:45 prayer and offertory
10:00 offertory