

A More Excellent Way

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1 Corinthians 13: 1-13

If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. ² 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. ³ If I give away all my possessions, and if I hand over my body so that I may boast,^[a] but do not have love, I gain nothing. Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant⁵ or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; ⁶ it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. ⁷ 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. 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.

“But strive for the greater gifts. And I will show you a still more excellent way.” That’s how the 12th chapter of 1 Corinthians ends. It wasn’t part of our reading today, but it was last week as we talked about how the work of the church takes all of us. In that reading from last week, Paul talks about how we all have different gifts, different roles to play in the body of Christ and that each part is important and that no person, no role is more important than any other. We don’t all have to do the same thing, but we all have something to offer and if we as a church are going to live into who God is calling us to be, then it takes all of us.

Today’s reading is the very next chapter – 1 Corinthians 13 – that includes some of the most beautiful and memorable prose in our entire Scripture, all about love. And because Chapter 13 is a different chapter from chapter 12, it’s easy to think of it as like a different topic all together – you know Chapter 12 is where Paul talked about Spiritual Gifts, then he turns to love in Chapter 13 – sort of like independent sermons. But that’s not how it worked at all. You see, the chapter divisions were added to our Scripture much later and for a very practical reason – to make it easy to find a particular passage of Scripture. So I can say, our reading today is 1 Corinthians 13 and it’s pretty easy to find. But an unintended consequence of that is that the chapter divisions can sometimes divide selections of Scripture that the writer intended to be part of a whole. Paul’s chapter on love is not moving on to a new thought, but rather a continuation, or maybe even the fulfillment, of what he was saying in Chapter 12.

Paul wants his readers to understand that we all have different roles to play, different things we are good at, different passions that make us come alive and we need all of those different parts, but one thing that every single one of us can do is to love each other. And he goes on to say that if we can't do that, if we can't be loving towards one another, well, it doesn't really matter how good we are at anything else. I could be the best preacher in the world, but if I'm not loving, it doesn't matter. We could have the very best children and youth ministries, the most moving music, the most dynamic ministries but if all of that is not undergirded by love, then none of it means anything. Listen to what Paul says:

If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. ² 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. ³ If I give away all my possessions, and if I hand over my body so that I may boast, ^[a] but do not have love, I gain nothing.

Last week, I said in my sermon that 2022 can be a gift for us because this is the year that we as a church will be doing a strategic planning process as part of our work to be ready to call our next settled pastor. During this year, we are going to lean into the question, "Who is God calling us to be right now?" I don't know how we are going to answer that question together, but there is one thing that I'm certain about. Whatever our process looks like, whatever the end result may be, if it is not grounded in love for each other and love for the community around us, it will have been all for nothing.

One of my favorite Advent songs is the hymn, "Awake, Awake and Greet the New Morn," and there's a lyric from that song that goes like this, "Let love be our song, and love our prayer, and love our endless story."

If love is our guiding force, then I'm confident that the rest of this process will work itself out in ways far greater than any of us could imagine. Love really is the magic sauce that can pull all this together.

Ok, so I know you may be thinking something like this, "Ummm, well, yeah R.G., thanks for stating the obvious. Of course love is our guiding principal. We're a church after all." That sentiment is of course right. Nothing I've said this morning is groundbreaking or earth shattering in the least. It is, in fact, stating the most basic tenet of our faith to say that love must ground everything we do. But what I really appreciate about what Paul does in this passage is that he specifies what love looks like because love can be a very abstract thing if we're not careful.

Listen again to what he says:

Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant ⁵ or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful

For Paul, if we are going to love each other, then for that love to be genuine, it means we also have to be patient with each other, we have to recognize that we might not always get our way and be ok with that, we have to not become irritable or resentful when we don't get our way.

And suddenly loving each other doesn't sound so easy, does it?

There have been so many churches over the years that have found themselves in such conflict and controversy. We've experienced some of that ourselves, haven't we? And my guess is that virtually every single one of those churches, if you were to ask them if they valued loving each other, they would say, "Yes. Of course." But if we were to press them a little bit further and say, "Oh ok, you love each other, were you then also patient with each other?"

"How did people accept not getting their own way?"

"Did you turn towards feelings of resentment?"

My guess is that if we were to answer those questions honestly, we would find that all of us have a little more work to do to be as loving as we would like to be. And that's a really important thing for us to remember. I said that this upcoming year can be really exciting for us as we begin developing our strategic plan, but it can also be a little dangerous too because anytime we are imagining who we are called to be going forward, especially if that might include doing some new or different things, then we might now all agree on what that should be. In fact, if a few months from now, we all had the exact same vision for what our church should be going forward, I'd be shocked. And I'd also be a little concerned because we are stronger because of the diversity of our experiences and our perspectives. But if that diversity is truly going to be a strength, it means that all of us have to accept here at the outset that there may be times in this process where we are tempted to lose patience, where we are tempted to insist on our own way, where we might be tempted to feel a little resentment if things don't work out exactly like we wanted them to.

And if at any point in this year, we find ourselves in that place, let's remember Paul's words, "The greatest of these is love." Loving each other is more important than any individual ministry, it's more important than having our own way, it's more important than being right.

So what does this mean practically? It doesn't mean that if you find yourself disagreeing with someone else in the year ahead, you just give in. As I've said, everybody's opinion, everybody's perspective matters and I trust that you wouldn't be sharing yours if you didn't genuinely believe it. We need everyone to share honestly and openly your hopes, dreams, and vision for this church. But what it does mean, I think, is that after all opinions have been heard, all perspectives shared, if we move in a direction that might not have been your preferred direction, you can trust that it's still going to be ok and that what matters more than what decision we made is the relationships we have with each other.

I've told you before that my grandmother lived to be 111 years old. She had more than a few interesting quirks about her, one of which, is that she was terrified to ride in any car going faster than 45 miles per hour. We lived in a small town in rural Alabama and the nearest town that had restaurants, or places to shop, or really things to do was about 25 miles away down a two lane road. We would start out, my grandmother sitting in the front seat of the car, her eyes glued to the speedometer and before long, we were the cause of traffic backing up. It drove me crazy. As a ten year old boy, I got bored in the car and I hated thinking that we were likely the objects of a few choice words from those behind us. One time, I finally said to Mom, "We have got to drive faster. You know perfectly well that it's safe to drive 55 miles per hour at least."

I'll never forget her response, "You're right. It is safe to drive 55 miles per hour. But that would really upset mother and we don't do things if we can avoid doing them to upset the people we love. You are right that we can drive faster, but just because you're right doesn't mean it's the right thing to do. Driving a little slower doesn't harm anyone and it makes your grandmother feel safe, and that's the most important thing to me because we love her."

Friends, if over the course of this year, or really at any point in our life as a congregation, we feel that we may be losing patience with each other, or that we're upset because we're not getting our way, or that we're starting to feel a little bitter, let's make sure we pause for a moment and remember what's most important.

"And the greatest of these is love."