

A More Excellent Way

1 Corinthians 12: 27 – 13: 13

Reading the New Testament can be a little like reading someone else's mail. Paul, the Apostle, wrote to the followers of Jesus in the city of Corinth, a church he founded. He was writing in response to some questions and some problems. We can be grateful for the problems with the Corinthians because prompted lots of letters from Paul, at least two of which are found in our New Testament.

One of the questions involved spiritual gifts. Last Sunday, (in the sermon *What Are My Spiritual Gifts?*) we talked about the first part of Paul's response. Now, for the rest of the response! Paul the Corinthians, in so many words, that people are not all the same. We're just not made that way!

The problem was that the Corinthians' all seemed to be feeling either *one up* or *one down* in terms of their spirituality. The practice was becoming dangerous to the community! Jealousy and envy creeping in can be very destructive.

Who among you is part of a family with a favored member? Maybe it's a *fair-haired* child who seems to be blessed with many talents and also cursed with extraordinary expectations? This child often carries the hopes and expectations of the parents on his/her shoulders. What a burden to be that child! What a pain it can be to have a sibling like that!

Feelings of resentment or jealousy are practically universal. The Smothers Brothers were a comedy team in the late 1960's. Their tag line was for one brother to complain, "Mom always liked you best!" In real-life families, these patterns are more destructive than funny.

Organizations such as churches also wrestle with similar feelings. One program area gets more attention, participation, and money than another. My former church once experienced some tension as limited financial resources were allocated between the missions ministry and the personnel budget (staff salaries).

Here at Crossroads, we are not exempt. We are having an ongoing conversation about the need for support in our children's Sunday School -- for volunteer teachers and helpers. The frustrations stem from what feels like a lack of energy and enthusiasm within the congregation to get involved in this ministry. It is as though the congregation is only paying lip service to the importance of this program area.

Inevitably, there is some tension, and feeling of competition, with other church programs that seem to be getting more participation and experiencing a higher level of energy -- for example, worship or music. Regardless of the cause and effect relationship -- that the energy being giving to one is taking away energy for the other) -- the feelings involved are natural. They can reveal solvable problems and lead to positive action. Tensions can also lead to competitive tension that can be destructive to the community.

A similar, though much more extreme situation, was taking place in Corinth. The value people were placing, in that church, on certain spiritual gifts seemed to be devaluing other gifts and other people. There was a growing sense of tension and unhealthy competition.

Paul responded in typical pastoral fashion. No, he did not change the subject, but he did try to paint the bigger picture! He talked about the importance of diversity within the body of Christ -- the church at Corinth and, by extension the church at Crossroads. So many of the problems experienced by Christianity today -- also by society and government -- result from an unwillingness to embrace diversity, to accept the value of others' different views and different choices -- to respect them.

We call ourselves the body of Christ. In a real sense, the arms and legs God uses to bring justice, peace, and healing. Jesus lived a long time ago. His spirit guides us today. His early followers called him the Christ, the Messiah, because, in some sense, he fulfilled the expectation as one anointed to represent God's presence on earth. They believed that he marked the beginning of making things right between people and the great Mystery we call God.

There is a lot we don't know about Jesus' life. We do know that he walked around touching and healing and talking about, justice, peace, and wholeness. He comforted and he also prodded. This task today belongs to us.

In his letter to the Corinthians, Paul was trying to convey the message of how important it was for them to be Christ's body – arms, legs, and voice – in the city of Corinth. The spiritual gifts they possessed as a whole were the way God was revealed through them to the larger community. Each individual's gifts were the way God was revealed to them through each other.

Then Paul offers a key, not only for understanding, but also for living out their whole faith in God through Christ in a very practical way. He wrote, "I'm going to show you the best way -- a still more excellent way;" better than the most excellent spiritual gifts, more powerful than the talents of all the people put together.

"If I speak so eloquently, with passion so that the angels weep and people are transformed, but do it without love, it becomes as beautiful as the sound of a rusty gate creaking or the racket noisy instruments (Crossroads Band excepted!). OR if I have the power of prophecy and insight like you wouldn't believe, understand all mysteries and knowing all there is to know, AND on top of that have faith so strong that I can move mountains just by the power of my belief – if I have all that, but don't have love, I am worth absolutely nothing. All that faith, all that knowledge, all that understanding, and \$1.50 can buy me a cup of coffee!

Paul keeps selling the value of love. If I were superbly moral, ethical, and downright holy – giving away all my possessions, becoming like St. Francis or Mother Theresa – and even more, allow myself to be killed, a martyr for my faith! If I were to go that far, and really have something to brag about (in heaven, I guess because I'd be dead), all that not motivated by love, there is absolutely no gain -- zero benefit! That's how important love is to the way we're made. That's how fundamental love is to following Christ.

The greatest spiritual gift is love. It is more important than everything else put together. What is this love? Paul describes its nature by calling it *Agapé* – like the love of God and the love seen in Jesus. Love is patient, persistent, and it never gives up in a relationship. Love is kind and cares more for others than for self.

Love is not envious, boastful, arrogant, or rude. Love doesn't want what it doesn't have. It does not insist on its own way: doesn't strut, doesn't have a swelled head, and doesn't force itself on others. Love isn't willful, isn't always "me first." Now, this list of don'ts does not disqualify us. It can help us see when our behavior is not loving, not reflecting *Agapé*. There may be some shame when we see ourselves in this light.

Love is not irritable or resentful. It doesn't fly off the handle and doesn't keep score of the sins of others. Love does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in truth. It doesn't revel when others grovel. When our lives look like Paul's list of "don'ts," we are least like the nature of God. But there's some good news. This is when we are most in need of drawing closer to God, most in need of being open to the Spirit, and most in need of being embraced by our community – those who love us, those we love.

I appreciate the presence of *Agapé* in others and when it shows up in me. I appreciate love's compassion, that love bears all things (puts up with anything), believes all things (trusts

God always), hopes all things (always looking for the best in people and situations), and endures all things (never looking back or second guessing).

Love never ends. It keeps going to the end. Love is the sign of holiness within each person. Love is the spiritual gift that reveals the divine presence, the Christ, whose body includes all humanity.

Paul told the Corinthians one last thing: to love as God loves is the product of maturity. You have to grow up to love that way. This message is for us as well as for the Corinthians. Such love is the mark of our lives as we grow up and mature as human beings, but surely not maturity in years of living or even in life experiences. Our own experience tells us that the very young can possess this love and the very old can exhibit its absence.

Paul meant spiritual maturity. This is drawing close to God, the Mystery of life. This is living in love with friends and enemies alike. This is living by faith that the underlying reality of the universe is love.

Paul was writing to the Corinthians in the expectation that the end of age would be coming soon. He expected Christ to return, all the dead to be resurrected, and all mysteries to be clarified. 2000 years later, that hasn't happened yet (unless we missed it and got left behind!?!). Many are still waiting and expecting. Many others have given up looking.

Still others look for a different kind of transition. I look across the divide of death in the hope of clarity, that the mystery will be revealed then. Many times, I have stood at gravesides spoken the words Paul wrote, "now they know even as, for so long, they have been known."

The hope of clarifying what is now mystery compels my faith. Perhaps it compels yours also? What lies beyond the end of our lives is a mystery to us. We can trust by faith that the God we worship is the mystery at the heart of life and awaits us beyond all mystery – and will hold us then as God holds us now.

Perhaps there is a time beyond time when we will see and understand more clearly. What seems clear to me now is that it is not so much the process of growing up in life and in faith that enables us to take on the characteristics of love exemplified by Jesus. It is more that the imitation of Christ, especially in a community like this, that enables us to grow up and mature. In this case, our being follows our doing. How do we grow up spiritually? How do we draw closer to God? We do it by acting with love -- practice, practice, practice.

Who do we love this way? We are to love the other in our primary relationship, those in our nuclear and extended families, our family of origin. We are to love those in our circle of friends, our enemies, and those in our family of faith. We are to love the broader community, our society, the community of this nation, the community of humanity, and that of all creation.

As we love, let us be encouraged by the New Testament writer (1 John 4: 7) who says, "beloved, let us love one another, for love is of God and everyone who loves is born of God and knows God; for God is love."

Let us take heart and rejoice, my friends, in this love. In the words of Abbe de Tourville:

Accustom yourself to the wonderful thought that God loves you with a tenderness, a generosity, and an intimacy which surpasses all your dreams. Give yourself up with joy to a loving confidence in God and have courage to believe firmly that God's action towards you is a masterpiece of partiality and love.... (from *Letters of Direction*, 1939)

As you go from this place of worship, more than anything you may remember of my words, remember this: you are loved by a power greater than yourself. The grand mystery of all life delights in you. You are a holy work of art – a work in process.