



Epiphany Series: “God Shows the Way”

“The Gospel in a Word:” 1 Corinthians 13

3 February 2013: 4th Sunday after Epiphany

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“Wars teach us not to love our enemies, but to hate our allies.”

—W. L. George—

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The occasion we most often hear this biblical text is at a wedding and we need not wonder why. 1 Corinthians 13 speaks with command about love within a covenant relationship—which marriage most certainly is. Yet 1 Corinthians 13 is sandwiched between two long pieces of Paul’s first letter to Corinth. This letter concerns the topic of spiritual gifts or things or matters or people—it can be translated in all these ways. Whatever the translation of “spiritual gifts,” it has to do with building up the church—the Body of Christ. Although we could argue that faith, hope, and love are not strictly speaking spiritual gifts it is hard to imagine exercising the gifts without faith, hope, and love. A hot skillet is not a part of what we eat when we eat a grilled cheese sandwich—yet we might have a hard time envisioning eating a sandwich such as this without a skillet.

In 1 Corinthians 12, Paul writes about gifts of teaching, healing, prophecy, and speaking/interpreting tongues. There are many other gifts as well and Paul’s list is suggestive not exhaustive. All gifts are important. Skipping chapter 13 and moving to 14, Paul writes about *glossolalia*, or speaking in tongues. Paul knows this is a point of division for the church. He is clear that although he himself speaks in tongues, it is not a litmus test for who is or is not a Christian. Rather the only thing Paul reminds the Corinthian church about is this: the only valuable gift is the gift that builds up.

May we hear the commercial for love inserted into Paul’s discourse on spiritual gifts:

1 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, but do not have love, I gain nothing. 4 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; 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. 8 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, 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 (1 Corinthians 13:1-13).

Last Sunday about diversity someone whom I respect said: “With all we have to protect and justify as individuals that unity about which you spoke will never really happen beyond lip service.” True enough. But in every congregation and in every human life, there are spoken and unspoken assumptions about what is most important. The church is full of diverse theological viewpoints, programs, small groups, organizations, missions, and specialized ministries.

For much of the time, there is room in the church for this diversity to coexist peacefully. When resources of space, time, and money are scarce, tensions can arise, and unspoken assumptions are sometimes verbalized in hurtful and divisive ways. Social and cultural concerns press upon the church and lead some within the church to insist on their own way. When this happens, Christians seem to have a special gift for cloaking self-interest with self-righteousness (*Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary - Feasting on the Word – Year C, Volume 1: Advent through Transfiguration, page 304*).

When conflict occurs in the church—which Paul knows about—there is something that outweighs our need to assert our power or opinion or rights or authority. It is the glue of God’s *agape* love seen in Jesus the Christ that shows us a “better way.” If we could see ourselves function from the point of view of this kind of love, then I dare say most of us would mend our ways.

As some of you know I was selected for jury duty this week. There was one juror who was at odds with eleven others person about every question we considered. She



even made coffee so weak in the jury room that fish could have happily lived in the pot. When several protested, she said: “This is the way I drink it and you can too.” The she poured herself about half a cup and that was the last time anyone visited the coffee pot. You can imagine what happened when we got down to the serious business about innocent or guilty and how long a sentence was to be imposed. When eleven others disagreed with her, she left the courthouse in a huff and refused to speak to anyone with whom she had spent the last three days. Her spiritual gift was that she was a world class pouter!

The point is she from the perspective of *agape* love she was neither patient nor kind. Rather she was arrogant and rude. Worst of all she was irritable and resentful. My guess is that if she could have seen herself as eleven others saw her she would have been different. This *agape* love is the lens Paul wants us to use as Christians to see ourselves and our relations to others in Christ.

If Paul summed up 1 Corinthians 13 for us, he might suggest three things:
Love is central to the church because it is essential.
Love is central to the church because it is unsurpassed.
Love is central to the church because it is foundational.

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David Neil Mosser, FUMC of Arlington, Texas 76011