

4 Epiphany
1 Corinthians 13:1-13
February 3rd, 2019
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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. 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. 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.

Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. 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. For we know only in part, and we prophesy only in part; but when the complete comes, the partial will come to an end. 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. 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. And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love.

“...now abide faith, hope, love, these three; and the greatest of these is love.” This passage from Paul’s first letter to the church in Corinth is such an inspiring poem about love that even people who don’t much care for Paul, still enjoy this reading.

Some friends gave Jennifer and me a copy of this reading written in French with calligraphy as graceful as the poem itself and with illuminated lettering as enlightening as Paul’s message. It hangs in our entryway to brighten our coming home and inspire our going out.

What Paul wrote about love, you see, is entirely appropriate for weddings where it has become so popular that we can forget that the original context had little to do with the love of two people for each other. Paul is concerned for the well-being of a community and the love he describes is about the church, the Body of Christ.

At the end of last week’s reading from this same letter, Paul told the church to be zealous, to desire earnestly, that is, the greater gifts of grace and a yet more excellent way that Paul is trying to show.

This reading is the centerpiece of a writing in three parts, a Hebrew poet’s method of showing us what is paramount. Bookended by two sections on spiritual gifts, Paul draws our attention to the work of the church as more than a loose collection of spiritual gifts. He describes a disposition; a unifying, underlying inclination toward love that encourages characteristic behaviors.

These behaviors are the works of love that nourish and grow the body of Christ, where the whole is far greater than the sum of the parts and where

also every part is necessary; every gift indispensable; every person vitally important.

Paul is writing to the church in Corinth, a multicultural and prosperous city where Greek and Roman culture and philosophy are mixed with a handful of Jewish sensibilities across a wide range of economics and lifestyles. The church reflected and struggled with the same diversity found in the city. They, too, are divided by philosophies and understandings of the newly emerging Christian faith. They are split by differences in status, in backgrounds and understandings of sexuality. All these differences have created tension; tension that has captured Paul's attention and care.

We, of course, are no strangers to the kind of racial, political and religious divisiveness that sparked Paul's letter. And our strategies for negotiating these divisions leave a great deal to be desired. Like the folks in Corinth, mutual respect and collaborative negotiation have taken a back seat to choosing sides, as if the spectrum between the two poles did not exist.

Chronic separation can lead us to start completely dismissing each other's perspectives and disregard verifiable truth in single-minded pursuits to justify our side's position. We can enflame mutual alienation by allowing ourselves to suspect, reject and dehumanize anyone who disagrees with us.

The reading from Luke is the story of a different divisive situation. Jesus has returned to Nazareth, his hometown, for what amounts to the inaugural address for his ministry. He read from Isaiah, said a few words and people were amazed. And they were all set for Jesus to fix Nazarene society.

And then he chose to provoke them.

Not to spurn them, mind you, but to challenge them to unite. In reminding them that they were chosen to bring the blessings of the God of Israel to all people, he implies that they will have to undergo the same transformation of consciousness that he did.

Because to be known and loved by God is to be sent to others.

When they think Jesus is bringing God's blessings to them, they are delighted. When they hear that they are to become blessings to others, especially to Gentiles, they are enraged to the point of murder. Such a short hop from approval to condemnation.

Just so, the middle of the Epiphany season is our opportunity to explore the on-going revelation and manifestation of God, especially when that insight challenges our inaction. Right between the Christmas season and Holy Week, we get a few precious weeks to unwrap the gifts God is giving us, to recognize the treasure that God sees in each of us and start practicing the blessings that God has entrusted us to give to others.

This is the love-in-action that Paul writes about. Where English has only one word for love, ancient Greek gave Paul four words for different types of love that he could have used: *eros* refers to romantic love; *storge* is the love of family; *philia* is love for friends; and *agape* refers to self-giving love.

Paul didn't write about what love *is*. Instead, he described what love *does* and what love does *not* do.

The love he describes is a holy force – can I say a Spirit – that binds a community, whether it is a church community or a community of two people. Love is an approach to life expressed in observable conduct – in actions that are motivated by the desire to *be* a blessing from God to others.

This is the love that is compelled to be *patient*, a form of courage practiced out of consideration for others. Love that can only *act kindly*, both open-handed and open-hearted. That *rejoices in the truth*, specifically in the revelation of God's truth. That *bears all things*, all the joy and burdens that the community bears. Love that *trusts* all things, especially that there is some good in every person, some grain of truth in all perspectives.

This is the love that knows only to *hope all things*. Not optimistically but passively waiting for life to get better – love *acting* on the trust that together with God we can make the world around us better. Love that *endures all things*, not as a door-mat, but as a willing agreement to mutual loyalty, each respecting the liberty and integrity of the other, joining separate destinies and fortunes into a shared journey traveled in solidarity.

Love that binds and builds up community is not envious, a reference to the Middle East concern about casting an evil eye toward others that leads to persecution and misery for them. Love that never boasts pridefully, rudely taking undeserved credit or stimulating feelings of inadequacy in others. That is never arrogant, an attitude that presents self-inflated, false images that slow self-awareness and build corrosive barriers.

Seeking our own way can come at the expense of others and a quick temper can lead to anger, which too easily these days escalates into outrage and verbal violence. Carrying grudges – brooding over real or imagined injuries – can fester in the heart and mind where forgiveness can relieve these burdens. And rejoicing at injustices or unrighteousness in the lives of others diminishes their humanity and separates their fate from our own.

Once we are aware of what God has done and continues to do for us, we are joyfully compelled and empowered to love others. And love never fails. (That's a better rendering of the Greek.) We are capable of loving in the ways that Paul describes because God has known us fully and loved us first. Prophecies, tongues and knowledge will come and go.

Love never fails.

“But now abide faith, hope, love, these three.” What remains, you see, what abides through all eternity is *God’s* faith, God’s loyalty to the children of God, no matter what. What endures, despite all appearances to the contrary, is *God’s* hope, God’s unreserved conviction that the Holy Spirit moving through us can inspire us to act toward the reconciliation of all God’s children. And so, like the church in Corinth, we too have faith and hope in abundance.

We are just as rich with the greatest of the three: love – God’s absolute commitment to the unity and integrity of the community. The purpose of all our spiritual practices begin with receiving God’s loving regard, always streaming toward us; God’s creative, boundless affection for all that we have in common and all that makes us distinct. Faith and hope blossom as we accept being uncovered, discovered, as people that God loves.

In Luke’s story, Jesus provokes his fellow villagers toward loving action, and they respond poorly. They have adult choices to make. And so, still loving them, Jesus passes through their midst goes on to Capernaum to continue his ministry. Paul wrote to the church because of similar real-life complexities and challenges in human communities. His poem to love describes the same path that Jesus preached and lived as resolution to community fracturing.

Paul’s letter to the Body of Christ – to all Christians, to St. Elizabeth and each one of us – is a wake-up call and a guide to faithful, hopeful action. Once we accept love’s discovery of us, we begin to heal in humility. And then, because to be known and loved by God is to be sent to others, we act.

God’s love becomes the inspiration and the goal for all that we do for the people in our lives.

And the love of God never fails.

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