

On God's Love
I Corinthians Chapter 13
October 25, 2020

Our lesson for this week is from one of the best known and often heard passages of the Bible, Chapter 13 of Paul's first letter to the Corinthians, the Love chapter. We hear it read often at weddings. It is a delight to the ears and to our hearts. The lesson writer has arranged the scripture reading for this passage to be read in three voices. We will try to do that Sunday, conditions permitting.

I would like to try to put this reading into context. Paul came to Corinth after he was unsuccessful in Athens. There he found a city that was large, very busy, and very diverse. People came to Corinth from all over the Roman empire, primarily drawn there for trade and business purposes. Corinth is on an isthmus only four miles wide. It was advantageous to ship goods over that four miles between the Aegean Sea and the Gulf of Corinth, rather than to take the longer and much more dangerous route around the Peloponnese Peninsula. That passage around the southernmost point, Cape Malea, was so dangerous that there was a saying, "Let him who sails around Malea forget his home." (It's called Cape Matapan now.) At Corinth, smaller ships could even be moved from one side to the other on rollers. Or, cargo was ported from a ship on one side to another on the other side. Most of the East-West trade in the Eastern Mediterranean Sea passed through Corinth. It was a rich and prosperous city. Corinth was also a new city. The old Corinth was destroyed by Roman conquest in 146 B.C., and a new city was founded on the site in 46 B.C. by Julius Caesar, as a Roman city. The people were Romans, such as retired soldiers, Greeks there for merchants and labor, and others for similar purpose from all over the Eastern part of the empire.

People who came to Corinth brought their gods and religion with them. There was a big temple to Aphrodite, the goddess of love, with all that came with it. Serapis of Egypt was worshiped, and many others. Of course, there were Jews as well. But, the morality of the people of Corinth was well known for immorality, and even wickedness. A word meaning "to live like a Corinthian" had become part of Greek vocabulary, that meant to live in drunken and immoral debauchery.

So, in the midst of this diverse and polyglot population, surrounded by a civilization of prideful immorality, was the Church in Corinth. The members struggled to be what they should be despite all of these influences, and their own internal divisions. In other words, they were living in a world much like our own.

Paul learned of these problems and wrote the letter we have as I Corinthians from Ephesus, probably in 55 A.D..

The basic problem was “diversity.” Now, diversity was a fact. The church included all kinds of people, sometimes subdivided as “Jew and Greek,” but “Greek” included everybody who was not an ethnic Jew, including people from Egypt, Rome, Greece, Asia Minor, and other places. Furthermore, the church had fractured into “parties,” each holding up some person as an exemplar. See 1:10-13:

¹⁰ Now I appeal to you, brothers and sisters,^[a] by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you be in agreement and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same purpose. ¹¹ For it has been reported to me by Chloe’s people that there are quarrels among you, my brothers and sisters.^[b] ¹² What I mean is that each of you says, “I belong to Paul,” or “I belong to Apollos,” or “I belong to Cephas,” or “I belong to Christ.” ¹³ Has Christ been divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul?

They were also divided with respect to the use of spiritual gifts, particularly the speaking in tongues. They held different views on the eating of meat, which in Corinth was typically offered in sacrifice to idols before being distributed or sold for consumption. Different practices at the Lord’s Supper meant that some ate full meals while others went hungry. There were lawsuits, immorality, questions concerning marriage and the support of the poor.

Paul in this letter gives fatherly practical advice to these new Christians. He begins in Chapters 1 and 2 by reviewing basics – Christians believe in Jesus, who died for us, and demonstrated God’s love. This is God’s wisdom, that may not make sense in the world’s terms. Paul then goes on to address a variety of particular topics that are causing trouble among the Corinthians in Chapters 3 to 12.

In Chapter 12 he addresses “spiritual gifts,” a particular sore point among the Corinthians. Those who were speaking in tongues seemed to hold themselves as superior, and others who could not understand what was being said felt cause for resentment. Paul states that people are given a variety of spiritual gifts.

12: ⁸To one is given through the Spirit the utterance of wisdom, and to another the utterance of knowledge according to the same Spirit, ⁹to another faith by the same Spirit, to another gifts of healing by the one Spirit, ¹⁰to another the working of miracles, to another prophecy, to another the discernment of spirits, to another various kinds of tongues, to another the interpretation of

tongues. ¹¹ All these are activated by one and the same Spirit, who allots to each one individually just as the Spirit chooses.

Paul illustrates this with a metaphor using the parts of the body.

¹⁴ Indeed, the body does not consist of one member but of many. ¹⁵ If the foot would say, “Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body,” that would not make it any less a part of the body. ¹⁶ And if the ear would say, “Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body,” that would not make it any less a part of the body. ¹⁷ If the whole body were an eye, where would the hearing be? If the whole body were hearing, where would the sense of smell be?

He finishes this chapter with:

²⁷ Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it. ²⁸ And God has appointed in the church first apostles, second prophets, third teachers; then deeds of power, then gifts of healing, forms of assistance, forms of leadership, various kinds of tongues. ²⁹ Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Are all teachers? Do all work miracles? ³⁰ Do all possess gifts of healing? Do all speak in tongues? Do all interpret? ³¹ But strive for the greater gifts. And I will show you a still more excellent way.

That leads us into Chapter 13. There is something better than focusing on our differences. There is a better way than each acting out our individual talents or callings alone. He speaks of a way that is needed if the Church is to be one with Christ in fulfilling God’s purpose.

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.

All of these gifts, all of these talents, the things that the Corinthians are squabbling about, mean nothing in the absence of love. The word for love used here is the Greek word “agape.” It is love “rooted in an undeserved goodness that men have received in Christ.” (Clarence T Craig, exegesis, *Interpreter’s Bible*, Vol

10, p. 167) In English translations agape has been translated as “love” but also sometimes “charity,” as in the King James, influenced by translation through Latin. The NRSV uses “love,” and that’s the better word.

A “noisy gong or clanging cymbal” was characteristic of certain pagan worship; such worship was ineffective. Speaking in tongues wasn’t helpful either if there was no translation. Prophecy can be taken as a kind of preaching, sometimes specifically about the fate that awaits he who does not believe. The danger of Hell does not save in the absence of love. It will just irritate. As Paul goes down this list, he moves from expressions to acts of good will. Each of these other talents or gifts Paul mentions, even those of good will, even self-sacrifice, if they are not motivated by and convey God’s love, are empty. Barclay points out that charity, without love, is demeaning. (I have heard of people refusing charity, especially government programs intended to help people in need, for this reason – they see it as demeaning.)

Paul goes on to list characteristics of God’s love, the love that we are to share with others in our dealings with other people as well. I can’t say anything to this better than Paul, as translated. These are all things to keep in mind as we deal with those who we love. These things are important just as much as well for all of those who we ought to love, because Jesus asks us to, but we have a hard time so doing. There is much, much more that could be said here, parsing out the nuances of this list. There just isn’t time or space for me to do that.

In verses 8 to 11 Paul stresses the permanence of love. Just so we believe in a permanent God who rules over the universe, and that God’s characteristic is love, agape love, that reaches out to us. In contrast, these other things are transient. To pick an example, it is interesting to read old knowledge and see how, with the passing of the years, things have changed. I have an astronomy book from about 1887. (I can’t find it now amidst the galaxy of stuff piled up to be organized! – Cindy’s joke!) The word “universe” and “galaxy” are synonyms – the fact that there are other galaxies had not been discovered. The true nature of those smudges of light in the night sky had not yet been revealed. The source of the Sun’s power was still thought to be gravity. Pluto had not been discovered, but the asteroids had just been noticed, and there was excitement over all of these new planets. My, but how much has changed in less than a century and a half! Just so, will all our prideful knowledge seem to generations in the future. Yet, these words of Paul, and the words of Jesus, and the Ten Commandments, and God’s love, all endure. They speak to us today just as to the Corinthians of Paul’s day.

We will seem like children in our state of knowledge in such matters to those who come later. And they to those further into the future. There is much we can’t

see, or know. The amazing thing about the Universe to me is that, the more we know, the more we find that there is yet to be discovered. Who can see past the veil of a black hole's event horizon? What really happens inside collapsed stars? What really goes on inside our brains, or minds? Are there really answers to some of the social problems humanity has faced for millennia, and the new ones arising all of the time? There is so much we don't know, or perhaps can't know.

This quality of God's love isn't transient. It can be seen as far back as the Bible goes, though it is often difficult to discern. We can find it in the Old Testament, as the Israelites came to understand God as being different from the pagan concepts of their neighbors. Their God loved them, and sought the best for them. In turn, He demanded, as part of the covenant, that they be obedient to His principles that defined a just society, such as the ten Commandments. God loved them though they went astray again and again. The beautiful example of Boaz in the book of Ruth illustrated God-like love. The Hebrew word "hesed," sometimes translated as "loving kindness," is used for that love. God was present in even small ways during that time of the Judges when life was brutal. David's 23rd Psalm speaks to God's love. The prophets brought messages of God's love as well, with Hosea's life and message being a good example. And, in the fullness of time, Jesus was born, lived his life teaching and caring for others, and ultimately died for us to show us God's love. His resurrection promises that we too will be with God ultimately, as His children, in a world to come that never ends.

We need faith, hope, and love, but the love of God reigns over all.

Prayer: Gracious and loving God, we want to love you as you love us, but it is hard. Not because of you, but because we are so easily distracted and selfish. Help us, so that we may more nearly display your love. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

This Sunday (Oct 25) I have been asked to conduct the service and deliver the message. It is "Praise of Missions" Sunday. I am expecting to use some of what Paul has to say, so I hope you will have the opportunity to be there and hear it, or perhaps visit my web site and download the text once I get it posted later.