

Scripture:

I Corinthians 1: 10 I appeal to you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree and that there be no dissensions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same judgment. 11 For it has been reported to me by some of Chloe's people that there is quarreling among you, my brethren. 12 What I mean is that each one of you says, "I belong to Paul," or "I belong to Apollos," or "I belong to Cephas," or "I belong to Christ."

11: 20 When you meet together, it is not the Lord's supper that you eat. 21 For in eating, each one goes ahead with his own meal, and one is hungry and another is drunk. 22 What! Do you not have houses to eat and drink in? Or do you despise the church of God and humiliate those who have nothing? What shall I say to you? Shall I commend you in this? No, I will not.

12: 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 workers of miracles, then healers, helpers, administrators, speakers in 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 with tongues? Do all interpret? 31 But earnestly desire the higher gifts. And I will show you a still more excellent way.

13: 1 If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not 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 have not love, I am nothing. 3 If I give away all I have, and if I deliver my body to be burned, but have not love, I gain nothing. 4 Love is patient and kind; love is not jealous or boastful; 5 it is not arrogant or rude. Love does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; 6 it does not rejoice at wrong, but rejoices in the right. 7 Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. 8 Love never ends; as for prophesy, it will pass away; as for tongues, they will cease; as for knowledge, it will pass away. 9 For our knowledge is imperfect and our prophesy is imperfect; 10 but when the perfect comes, the imperfect will pass away. 11 When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child; when I became a man, I gave up childish ways. 12 For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall understand fully, even as I have been fully understood. 13 So faith, hope, love abide, these three; but the greatest of these is love.

14: 1a Make love your aim, and earnestly desire the spiritual gifts. (RSV)

May God bless the hearing of his Holy word. Amen.

Was anybody surprised to hear some very familiar words of scripture just now? I'm sure you've heard this passage before, one of the most beloved in the whole Bible. It is often read at weddings, lifting up the ideals of love, as a couple joins in a lifelong commitment to the future.

Indeed, my inspiration to use this scripture today comes from attending the marriage of Matt and Aleia Parmenteri, this past July. Excerpts from Paul's 13th chapter of his first letter to the Corinthians were placed in picture frames at the ends of the aisles. I'd never seen that done before. This young couple took these words as good guidance for their marriage, and rightly so. But, if we limit the power of this scripture to just love in the context of marriage, we are missing much of its power.

Paul did not write the words of this well-known Chapter 13 in isolation, but as part of a rather long letter to the church he had founded in Corinth. There are 12 other chapters, lengthy ones, that come first. I have read excerpts from a few of those earlier chapters. The Corinthian church had problems. Paul, probably writing from Ephesus, was trying to help. I think some of those problems, and Paul's advice, are applicable to us in our situation today. Because in many ways, we, here in the United States, are like the Corinthians.

Let me tell you a bit about Corinth. There was an ancient city in Greece, right at the isthmus where the Peloponnesian peninsula connects to mainland Greece. That Greek city was utterly destroyed by the Romans in 146 B.C. The site was desolate for more than a century. In 44 B.C. Julius Caesar established a Roman colony there. Not Greek city, but a colony populated mostly by freed men from Italy. By the time Paul arrived about 95 years later, Corinth was the largest city in Greece, with a population of about 600,000. It was the capitol of the province of Acha'ia, most of modern Greece, and it was a prosperous commercial city on the level of Antioch and Ephesus. Corinth was an important shipping center, the pathway from the Gulf of Corinth to the Aegean Sea. Rather than take the dangerous route around the peninsula, cargos would be ported the 3 ½ miles and shipped from the other side of the isthmus. Even whole ships were dragged across and put into the water on the other side. That's like taking the Suez Canal instead of rounding Africa by the Cape of Good Hope in our day. It was good business.

By Paul's time, the population was from all over the Mediterranean world, with Greeks, Orientals, Romans, Egyptians, and, also, Jews. These people brought their gods with them. There were temples to Apollo, Isis, Dionysius (the god of wine), Asclepius (the god of healing), and most famous of all, the Temple of Aphrodite, the goddess of love. It is said that there were a thousand temple slaves and courtesans, both men and women, dedicated to the goddess. That made Corinth a popular tourist destination. There were shrines and altars to many other gods as well. Among the archaeological finds from ancient Corinth, there is also a stone inscribed, "Synagogue of the Hebrews."

Corinth had all the other features of a cosmopolitan city. There were shops and taverns. Drinking vessels have been found with inscriptions to Dionysius, Zeus, to Health, to Security, and to Love, among other things. Sort of like the souvenir mugs we collect these days.

Most people were poor. Many were slaves. Keep in mind, that slaves included administrators, teachers and tutors, and clerks. As well as manual laborers, such as the porters and boatmen who dragged the cargo and ships from one sea to another. It was a mixture of these people, mostly of the lower classes, but with a sprinkling of some wealthy and important individuals, that made up the Corinthian church.

None of the members of the Corinthian church grew up in the church. It hadn't existed until Paul came! They didn't yet know how to "be church." There was, as yet, no body of Christian traditions, except those that Paul or other teachers could convey. They were fortunate that when Paul came, he was joined by Priscilla and Aquila, both Jewish Christians, who had been expelled with other Jews from Rome by the emperor Claudius. After Paul left, the Alexandrian Jewish Christian teacher Apollos came, and sometime or other Cephas, that is, Peter, seems to have passed through Corinth and stayed a while on his way to Rome. So, is it any surprise that the Corinthian church, with this diverse and mostly gentile background, and having listened to teachers with many different perspectives, had problems?

In many ways, the modern United States resembles Corinth. People have been coming here from all over the world. They bring their own religious and cultural background. They listen to different voices. Within the Church in the larger sense, we are far from united. We are deeply affected by the culture, and issues, of the secular society in which we live.

The Corinthians were dealing with some issues that were different from those of our day. For example, the controversy over the Lord's Supper, which I read about in the scripture passage from Chapter 11. Did you hear what the problems were? Each brought his own food, and went ahead and ate with no regard for the needs of others. It was a communal meal. But they had not yet learned how to be a community. That issue, now in our time, has been settled. The Lord's Supper is now a sacrament or ordinance, not a general meal. The words Paul used as instructions to the Corinthians in the very next few verses are usually quoted as part of the Lord's Supper. Paul writes,

11: 23 For I received from the Lord what I also delivered to you, that the Lord Jesus, on the night when he was betrayed took bread, 24 and when he had given thanks, he broke it, and said, "This is my body which is broken for you. Do this in remembrance of me."

Paul also is concerned about divisions in the church concerning authority. Whose words, whose teachings, are authoritative. Did you hear that? From Verse 12, Paul writes:

12 What I mean is that each one of you says, "I belong to Paul," or "I belong to Apollos," or "I belong to Cephas," or "I belong to Christ."

In our day, we too identify by who or what we follow. By party, where you get your news, or whose opinions you listen to.

Some in the Corinthian church take Paul's side, against others who take Peter's side, against others who take Apollos's side, on various issues. Paul and Peter did have their disagreements. Paul was a Pharisee from Tarsus, in the Gentile world. Peter was a Palestinian Jew, a fisherman, not a scholar of the Law. They differed in how the Jewish tradition applied to gentile Christians. Yet, it was Peter, under God's guidance, who first welcomed gentiles into the Church. Apollos was a Jew of Alexandria, with an entirely different, more philosophical perspective. Priscilla and Aquila were from Rome, again, a different way of seeing things. Is that not true within the Church today? Different denominations have come down in different

places on Baptism and many other issues, and there are divisions within denominations, and often, within individual churches as well.

What is particularly interesting, and telling, is the last one of these. “I belong to Christ!” The perfect comeback. How can you not feel superior, when these others claim to be merely followers of Paul, Cephas or Apollos, by you are a follower of Christ!

This reminds me of Thanksgiving at my sister’s house back in 1991. My sister insisted on changing the TV to the news channel during the football game halftime. Her daughter wanted it to remain on the station showing the halftime show. This was during the “Desert Storm” gulf war. As my sister Patsy explained to Ginny, “Nothing is more important than the war, and your uncle (who was in the Army) is over there.”

Her daughter, who was about 3 years old, responded, “Yes there is!”

“No, there’s not.”

“Yes, there is!”

“No, there’s not.”

“Yes, there is!” (You know how such arguments go. Three times back and forth is the correct protocol.)

“Then, what is?” my sister asked, expecting a properly prepared triumph.

Ginny replied, “God is!”

Well, there wasn’t much Patsy could say to that! God was indeed more important than the war over Kuwait. I’m not sure what God meant to my niece Ginny at the time, but she sure knew how to use him to win an argument, even at that tender age.

“I belong to Christ!” That was the perfect put-down from one Corinthian to another. To someone who is supposed to be a brother or sister in Christ. Do we not sometimes do the same today? Don’t we often think of the perfect come-back or put-down too late, and wish we had given expression to our cleverness when we had the opportunity?

Another issue that divided the Corinthians was what Paul called “different gifts.” People are not alike in their talents and interests. We see that easily today. What was particularly harmful in Corinth was the expression of those who has the gift of “speaking in tongues.” That is, ecstatic expression in worship, that most people could not understand. These people seemed to think that their gift was above others’. In our day, speaking in tongues is not so much an issue. But it is easy to look at, and judge, other church members, who do not seem to contribute in what we see as “the work of the church.” Maybe because they don’t meet what we want them to do. If someone is cajoled into a church job for which they lack talent or enthusiasm or calling,

they will suffer fatigue and burn-out. And maybe even leave the church for another, or to no church at all. Have you seen that happen?

So, yes, there are problems. There were problems for the Corinthians. Problems for our churches. And problems for our country, and for our world. Paul goes through these issues with the Corinthians, and gives his perspective and advice on things like food offered to idols, marriage and celibacy, the Lord's Supper, and many other things. His advice is from the perspective of a Jewish scholar, but one who met the Lord Jesus on the road to Damascus. His particular solutions in Chapters 1-12, written to the Corinthian Church in that day, may not perfectly fit the modern world with our different circumstances. But, thanks be to God, Paul finally points out what he calls "a better way." A principle that will submerge the conflict over all those issues. The principle of love. I read it again:

12: 31 But earnestly desire the higher gifts. And I will show you a still more excellent way.
13: 1 If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not 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 have not love, I am nothing. 3 If I give away all I have, and if I deliver my body to be burned, but have not love, I gain nothing. 4 Love is patient and kind; love is not jealous or boastful; 5 it is not arrogant or rude. Love does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; 6 it does not rejoice at wrong, but rejoices in the right. 7 Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. 8 Love never ends; as for prophesy, it will pass away; as for tongues, they will cease; as for knowledge, it will pass away. 9 For our knowledge is imperfect and our prophesy is imperfect; 10 but when the perfect comes, the imperfect will pass away. 11 When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child; when I became a man, I gave up childish ways. 12 For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall understand fully, even as I have been fully understood. 13 So faith, hope, love abide, these three; but the greatest of these is love.
14: 1a Make love your aim, and earnestly desire the spiritual gifts.

In the context of Corinth, this is the answer. Love one another. The apostle John quotes Jesus at the last supper as saying,

John 13:34 "A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another; even as I have loved you, that you also love one another. 35 By this, all men will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another."

Paul elaborates on this by saying what love does. Not the passionate "love" practiced and commercialized at the Temple of Aphrodite in Corinth, but the kind of godly love lived out in the life and sacrifice for us of Jesus the Christ. Let me try to express some of that in today's language: Love doesn't try to score debating points. Love doesn't deliver the perfect put-down. Love doesn't justify getting ahead at someone else's expense. Love puts the other first. I can't say it any better than Paul does. I'd like to point out that, even as he articulates this principle behind Christian civility and community, Paul does so with humility. Our knowledge is incomplete. Even for those most knowledgeable, and that includes Paul himself. We see but

dimly. The future, when we share as children of God in the life hereafter, will bring clarity to all of those things. But the central message of the gospel is clear: faith, hope, and especially love, need to guide our actions.

This is difficult to live by. In our culture, we often think of love as a “feeling,” something spontaneous that we can’t control. But, that’s not what Jesus meant, and it’s not what Jesus did. For example, Jesus has some harsh words for the Pharisees. “You brood of vipers!” (Matthew 23:33) for example. But Jesus, expressing God’s love, laid down his life that all might be saved. Even Pharisees. For the Pharisee Nicodemus. Even for a Pharisee named Saul from Tarsus, who persecuted Jesus’s followers. Saul, that same man who, now known as Paul, writes this letter to the Corinthians, and to us. Love is something Jesus did. It is what Paul has done for the Corinthians and his other churches. Paul lived a way of life that included illness, persecution, abuse, and shipwreck, for their sake. He asks the Corinthians to practice love. Do these things. Practice patience, care, understanding, forgiveness, and humility with each other. Do it for Jesus’s sake. It is a “better way” than contention, disagreement, and self-promotion.

So how do we do “love” in our day, in our culture? Let me cite a few secular proverbs. I expect you have heard these.

“If you don’t toot your own horn, nobody else is going to toot it.” Heard that one? It says, promote and elevate yourself. Nobody else cares. That’s not what love does. Love sounds the horn for someone else. Love gives a complement, writes a letter of recommendation, remarks on good service, and praises the accomplishments of others.

“Don’t get mad; get even.” This is our culture’s expression of how to react to a slight. This isn’t new. The culture of revenge goes back to antiquity, and is still a guiding principle deeply entrenched in the world. This is not love. Paul writes to the Romans, probably from Corinth, saying:

12: 17 “Repay no one evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all.”

And, 19 “Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God, for it is written, ‘Vengeance is mine, I will repay,’” says the Lord.”

If we are faithful to God, our duty is to be a light unto the world; leave the issue of justice, for slights done to us, to God.

So, no, Paul’s words about love are not just for weddings. They are words to live by in a difficult, problem-filled world, where the norm is antagonism, put-downs, self-promotion, and hatred. We, as the Corinthians, need to hold these truths close. For faith, hope and love abide, these three; but the greatest of these is love.

Amen.