

It's The Way of Life  
I Corinthians 12:31b-13:8a  
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Last Spring a parent sent me something their preschooler had done. With their permission, I share it with you. In May of this year, a pre-school teacher gave an assignment to her four year old class. She asked them to write a self portrait answering this question: "What makes you, you?" One of our four year olds, our own Jack Barden responded this way, "I love my Mom and Dad because they help me...I also am very nice to people when I help people, when they fall down and get hurt, I tell the teacher and help them get up. I feel happy when I help people and that makes God happy. We pray at church and listen to God so we have a future." I could just say "Amen" and that be the sermon, couldn't I? Jack "gets" what the apostle Paul so desperately was trying to get the Corinthian congregation to understand.

This whole summer we've been trying to understand it too. Paul wrote the letter to address complaints in the congregation that some had shared with him. In this thirteenth chapter, Paul is still addressing some of those concerns, but we don't often think about that because of how the chapter is used in our contemporary context. This thirteenth chapter is most often used in weddings, so much so it's referred to as "the love chapter." Now don't get me wrong, I'm all for weddings...but this chapter is much more than an encomium of love. Paul is making his pivotal point ~ this is the climax of the letter not to be lost in sentimentality but in it to find a new way of life ~ a more excellent way!

This summer I've been re-reading Calvin in honor of his five hundredth birthday anniversary. Calvin said about this chapter, "I have no doubt that Paul intended it to reprimand the Corinthians in an indirect way, by confronting them with a situation quite the reverse of their own, so that they might recognize their own faults..." Remember the primary complaint was that the Corinthian congregation had divisions that were threatening their unity, their community. They were choosing one leader over another and preferring some gifts over the others. In this chapter, Paul is pointing out in a poignant way that love is the answer to those factions.

In the first three verses, Paul indirectly confronts them, by sharing the futility of religious practices if they are done without love. The Corinthian congregation was captured with the fascination of speaking in tongues. This "sign gift" was the focus of worship as were the people who had it, because for the Corinthians, those who could speak in tongues were "really spiritual." Paul refutes this; "if I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not love...I am a noisy gong or clanging symbol." Then Paul goes on to confront other practices that were honored more highly than some; "prophetic powers, understanding mysteries, faith to move mountains, but do not love, I am nothing!" Finally Paul says, "If I give away all I have, even my own body, but do not love, I gain nothing!"

Now, we don't have the same listing of religious practices, in fact, I'm pretty sure that our congregation is quite comfortable not having the obvious gift of speaking in tongues present. But let us ask ourselves the hard question: what religious practices do we engage in and are we engaged in them with love or would Paul respond to us in a similar way that he spoke to the

Corinthians. Now this could be hard and let's try not to be defensive. If anything, this exercise could help us hear Paul's point to the Corinthians in a way much more like the way they heard it, and then I'm confident that afterwards we will hear the "love chapter" differently.

The first three verses paraphrased for Covenant could be, "If we have the music of the angels flowing from our choir loft, but do not have love, we are a noisy gong or clanging symbol. If we have prophetic preaching and classes to understand all mysteries, and explore all knowledge, and if we have tremendous "faith in action" in Madison and around the world but do not have love, we are nothing. If we give away all we have, our money and time and talents, so much so that we can boast, or enjoy the boasting of others about us, but do not have love. We gain nothing." Powerful, huh?

Paul is driving his point home. Spiritual actions without love are meaningless. Love is what brings meaning. If we can ask ourselves why we do this or that, and the answer is "for love," then Paul would say that is the right answer. Love is the measure that we are to evaluate all we do. Doing the right things for the wrong reasons or doing some of the right things for the right reasons but then lacking love in other areas of our lives is not living the more excellent way. Love is preeminent.

Paul is clear that love is not a "higher" or "better" gift, love is a way of life...love is what forms the community.

Then Paul goes on to say, what love is and what it isn't. I have to admit to you before this sermon, I was tired of these verses, "love is patient, love is kind, love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude...on and on." Tired of them because I arrogantly thought I was doing them pretty well. And then, one morning about two weeks ago, when I was journaling as the sun came up, God used them to speak to my heart again and it was a dawn of a new day in more than one way! For over an hour, I sat with these verses, and for each phrase, prayed through how I hadn't been patient or kind, or how I had been envious, boastful, arrogant or rude, etc. in the last week. I tell you writing those down and looking at the ways I failed to live the way I want to live, the way God calls us all to live, was really hard and really humbling.

And we could do the same thing as a church! Praying through each phrase and seeing how our church has been or has not been living in love; in the last week, in the last month, in the last year. Have we been patient and kind in worship and service? Have our councils and committees, not insisted on their own way but worked together for the common good. Are we unified, respecting one another's gifts or are we honoring some gifts more than others and judging those who don't have the gifts we have or the gifts we like best.

We could also do the same exercise for our larger community as we live in it. Are we being loving in our advocacy for justice, for example. On Tuesday, in the Journal, the front page had two from our community pictured, Emilie Songolo and Pastor Emeritus Bill King. The Journal was highlighting their loving work for justice; Emilie in Africa and Bill in Peru. This week I've also watched and read the health care debate unfold as our nation grapples with complicated issues surrounding the importance of healthcare. I've appreciate the discussions, watching "democracy at work" as some have said, but the shouting matches ~ shoving matches that more

than bordered on rude have made me wonder how as people of faith do we participate in a way that reflects our grounding in love. It's hard and it's humbling!

Again, that's Paul's point. Living the more excellent way of love is hard and humbling. But we're not left to love on our own, remember these highlights from the verses that Fern read, "Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; God is love. We love because God first loved us." God's love is shared with us through Christ and through the Spirit Christ sent to us. There is a word that has been used to describe the Trinity: "perichoresis which is defined as a communion of self-giving love so deep that each of the persons is inseparably bound to the others."<sup>1</sup> This is the kind of community that God lives in; this is the kind of community God calls us to live in; a self-giving, inseparable, bound to each other, rooted in love, community.

"Attributes of love are learned patterns of behavior that must be cultivated over time in the context of community that models and supports such behavior."<sup>2</sup> one theologian has said, which brings us back to our four-year-old buddy Jack. Remember Jack's thoughts on what makes him, him. He said, "I love my Mom and Dad..." Jack can love his mom and dad because his mom and dad have loved him...can you hear the echo... "We love because God first loved us."

Jack continues, "because they help me...I also am very nice to people when I help people, when they fall down and get hurt, I tell the teacher and help them get up." Jack received the gift of helping from his parents, and then discovers in himself that he too has that gift of helping." Again, hear the echo from Paul's letter, [I Corinthians 2:12], "We have received not the spirit of this world, but the Spirit which is from God, that we might understand the gifts bestowed on us by God." A variety of gifts, none better than the others, different gifts not to be compared or used in competition, but to be shared in cooperation in the way that gives life, the way of love.

Then Jack goes on, "I feel happy when I help people and that makes God happy." Do you see how Jack gets it...? Using his gift makes him happy and he knows that makes God happy. That is what we are all to do, that's what this whole summer series has been about, that is what our lives are about, to discover and embrace our gifts, and when we do, we will be happy using them for the building up of the church, the service of others, and the glory of God!

And finally, Jack, being for us today the little child that leads us, proclaims a wonderful, God-given reminder. "We pray at church, and listen to God, so we have a future." We do pray, and we are listening to God, and we do have a future, a bright future living the more excellent way ~ the way of love.

Dan Migliore, *The Power of God and the gods of Power*, Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville. 2008 page 82

Richard Hayes, *Interpretation, A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching, First Corinthians*, John Knox Press, Louisville, KY page 232