

Now Is the Time for Love

1 Corinthians 13:1-3
Sunday, January 2, 2005

I invite you to try something this week: pick up any newspaper – the Times or Newsday – read the headline stories and see how many stories have to do with love. This week I picked up the NY Times. “Many Still in Need as Aid is Trickling to Stricken Area,” reads one headline. “This is an unprecedented global catastrophe,” said Kofi Annan of the UN, “and it requires an unprecedented global response.” Clearly, this is a story calling for us to love not just with words but with action. Another title reads “China’s ‘Haves’ Stir the ‘Have Nots to Violence.’” Both stories reflect the need for love. You don’t have to read the headlines though. The search for love is everywhere – in marriages, homes, churches, communities, workplaces, schools, campuses, offices, governments.

The Bible makes it clear what kind of people we should become: people who love. When someone comes to Christ in faith the Bible says that a new birth takes place. As a result of this new birth God places His Spirit within us. Christ lives within us – not metaphorically, but in reality (Galatians 2:20). How do we know that we have this Spirit, this presence of the Risen Christ? There are many signs, but the fundamental sign is simple: am I starting to love like Jesus? Is Christ’s love starting to flow through me to my spouse, my children, my friends, my co-workers, those who annoy me, those from other cultures, those outside my tribe or clique, even my enemies?

Love is the defining mark of the follower of Jesus (1 Timothy 1:5 and Galatians 5:6). The Apostle Paul calls it the “most excellent way” (12:31). In other words, do you want to live an excellent life? Do you want your life to matter? Do you want to pursue true success in life? I assume that everyone here would say yes. Then learn to love not with just any kind of love, but learn to love with the love of Christ (Ephesians 5:1-2).

Sounds so simple, doesn’t it? It’s not. For example, it’s easy for me to think I’m a loving person as I’m lounging on my sofa watching the latest Hallmark commercial, tears welling up in my eyes. But just wait until someone cuts me off on the LIE or someone exposes my weaknesses or threatens my masculine ego. Or let’s say you try to join TVC or any Christian community and you discover – over and over again – that the people are deeply flawed and weird and they just don’t “get it” like you do. We slip into the “idiot default” – you’re an idiot! **The journey of love is the most difficult journey of your life – but, ultimately, it is the only journey that matters.**

This passage provides a beautiful roadmap for the journey of love. Any passage in the Bible not only contains truth but it also involves a story, a story of real people in a real place and time and a real God who is calling out to His people. Here’s a brief overview of the story behind this passage: this letter was written to the church in the port city of Corinth. Corinth, much like Manhattan, had become the economic and cultural center of the world. But Corinth’s glory came to an abrupt end in 146 BC when Corinth clashed with Rome and the Roman armies sacked the city, burned it to the ground, slaughtered

the men and carted off the women and children into a life of slavery. Nearly one hundred years later, Julius Caesar reestablished the city of Corinth. Suddenly Corinth became a boom town – especially for the lower, disenfranchised classes - a commercial center of 30,000 people that often swelled to over 100,000 every two years during the Isthmian Games – a combination of sports and a cultural/arts festival. It had a hyper-competitive atmosphere in which the new elite vied with one another for glory and honor and control and power.

Into this cutthroat, competitive, ladder-climbing culture, in about the year 50 AD, a man named Paul came with a message about Jesus Christ. This good news provided a radical alternative to the values of Corinth. The Christian story proclaimed that when God came to earth in the person of Jesus, he rejected the way of power and glory, choosing the way of love. (1 Corinthians 1:18-31). Unfortunately, the church in Corinth didn't get that. Instead, Paul wrote to a church marked by elitism, power struggles, factions, sexual immorality, lawsuits, and an "us versus them" mentality. The more "mature" Christians, who should have gently instructed the less mature members of the church, instead just insisted on their freedom and rights. These selfish attitudes started strangling church life. Even the celebration of the Lord's Supper just made people cranky, selfish and rude.

Paul wrote this letter to people just like us: followers of Jesus who live in community, a community that seldom matches our ideals, a struggling, broken, fractured community that is nevertheless trying to follow the crucified risen One. You'll notice that this is chapter 13, which means that we're dipping into the end of Paul's letter. He's making a point that actually starts in Chapter 12 and ends in Chapter 14, so in order to understand the context of the whole point; I'm going to ask Pastor Kevin to give us an overview of the flow of Paul's argument.

Pastor Kevin Jordan

1. The Corinthian Church, among other things, was a church that was marked by division—a divided church (1:10).
 - a. It was a church divided into factions centering around particular leaders: some claiming to be followers of Paul, others claiming to be followers of Apollos, others followers of Peter, and still others followers of Christ (1:11-12).
 - b. There was division in the church over serious moral issues, like how to respond to sexual immorality among church members (5:1ff.; 6:12-19).
 - c. And there was division over a number of practical issues such as whether its best for a Christian to marry or not (7:1ff.), or whether Christians should abstain from certain foods (8:1ff.), and so on and so forth.
 - 1). And one of these practical issues over which they were divided concerned the issue of spiritual gifts, and particularly how they related to spiritual maturity.

2). It seems that certain people with more visible gifts like the gift of tongues, or the gift of prophecy or healing were looking down on those who didn't have those gifts, as if those gifts were evidence of a higher level of spiritual maturity or fullness of the Spirit.

2. And in 1 Corinthians chapters 12-14, we find the Apostle Paul specifically addressing this area of division, which, of course, then is the context in which he pens the famous "love chapter" that we are focusing on. And his response is at least 3-fold:

a. He tells them, first of all, that spiritual gifts are grace-gifts, therefore there is no room for boasting. God gives spiritual gifts to every Christian—to every member of the church—just as He determines (12:4-11). They are not merit badges that somehow prove ones spiritual prowess or competence.

b. Second, he tells them that no Christian is to regard their spiritual gifts, or the Christian life for that matter, from the perspective of mere individualism, but from a corporate perspective—the perspective of the Body (12:12-31). Just as no human body part, no matter how beautiful or well-formed it is, can function apart from the whole body working together in harmony, so no individual spiritual gift, no matter how well-polished it is, can function apart from the rest of the spiritual gifts operating in harmony within the body of Christ—the local church.

c. And third, and this brings us to chapter 13, Paul makes it clear that as important as spiritual gifts are, more important is the spiritual fruit of love.

1). The real measure of the Spirit's fullness in the life of the Christian—the real gauge of spiritual maturity—is not the possession of a particular spiritual gift, but a way of life called love.

2). And apart from love reigning supreme in a person's life, everything else, including spiritual giftedness, is judged utterly worthless.

3). In other words, the only infallible test of the Spirit's presence in the life of a Christian is not particular spiritual gifts, nor great theological knowledge, nor great acts of philanthropy, nor even certain worship styles, whether formal and stately, or exuberant and spontaneous. Rather, the only infallible test of the Spirit's presence and fullness in the life of a believer is love. Apart from love, says the Apostle Paul, you are spiritually bankrupt.

Pastor Matt Woodley

In verses 1-3 Paul begins with three conditional sentences whose powerful cadences – if, if, if, if, if, if - should have had a sobering effect on the church in Corinth. As we'll see in a moment, Paul is basically doing some spiritual butt-kicking: "You think you've arrived in the spiritual life? You think you're mature? As your pastor and your spiritual leader, I have to break this to you: you're still an infant, because your life is not penetrated by and overflowing with love, that is, the very same love that was in Jesus Christ. You're not living the Gospel, namely that Christ is in you." And then in verses 1-3 he lists many good spiritual gifts and activities (see the list in 12:8-10) - every one of which the believers in Corinth thought they had in abundance. "Yea, we got tongues," they strutted. "Yea, we have prophecy and knowledge and faith. Yea, we're busy doing great things for God. We work hard. We work ourselves to the bone." Unfortunately, all of their

spirituality didn't make them more loving; it just made them selfish, arrogant and rude. There is a sobering warning here: **spirituality, wrongly applied, can make us worse, not better. Spiritual activity and spiritual gifts from God, can drive us away from Jesus and his mission in the world.**

Verse 1 - Love is more important than the gift of tongues. *The tongues of men and of angels* refers to the spiritual gift of 'tongues,' human speech inspired by the Spirit but unknown to the speaker. For them the evidence of having "arrived" at such a "spiritual" state would be speaking the "tongues of angels." But possessing the gift of tongues, speaking with a heavenly prayer language akin to the angels, without a radical concern for building community, loving others, respecting others, mentoring others, wasn't a beautiful sound at all. It was like taking a bronze gong (and the city of Corinth prided itself on its beautiful bronze products) and banging it over and over again. A gong makes a lot of noise, it draws attention to itself, but ultimately it is empty and annoying. It's harsh, all noise but no melody.

To "have love," therefore, means to be love others the same way God in Christ has loved us. To say you're a follower of Jesus, to claim that you're walking in the Spirit, but to then lack love is to act like an ear-shattering, annoying gong.

Verse 2 – Love is more important than prophecy, knowledge and faith. Paul again lists specific gifts mentioned in 12:8-10, gifts the church at Corinth possessed – and took great pride in possessing. *Prophecy*, the gift he regularly considers to be of primary significance for the community (cf. 1 Thess. 5:19-20; 1 Cor. 14:1-25). Prophecy involves proclaiming God's word to people. *Knowledge* was another of the Corinthian's favorite and special gifts (cf. 1:5; 8:1). *Mysteries* are truths that people could never find out for themselves. They know them only because it has pleased God to reveal them. *Faith*, which, together with its qualifier, "that can move mountains," means the gift of special faith for mighty works. In order to make this point as emphatic as possible, three times Paul emphasizes "all": *all* mysteries, *all* knowledge, *all* faith.

You get the impression that the church in Corinth was like a high school cheering squad: "We got spirit, yes we do, we got spirit how about you?" Unfortunately, all of their spirituality didn't make them more loving; it just made them selfish, arrogant and rude. But without love all of our gifts, all of our knowledge, all of our spirituality and all of our maturity and all of our "rightness" amounts to nothing, a big fat zero: "but do not have love, I am nothing." Not just, "I have accomplished nothing" but "I am nothing."

Verse 3 – Love is more important than service and sacrifice (good deeds). Then Paul turns to deeds of mercy and dedication. Paul is speaking of giving one's goods in small amounts ("piece by piece"), *i.e.* to large numbers of people. It is sobering to reflect that we could empty our bank accounts, sell everything we own, fly to Sumatra and die for the homeless, but do it all without love. Or we could be so right on every issue, so busy with Bible studies, so dedicated with godly activities – even to the point of giving our life away in little pieces, but we don't know how to love.

Jonathon Edwards said, *There may be great sufferings for religion, and yet no sincerity of love in the heart... Whatever men may do or suffer, they cannot, by all their performances and sufferings, make up for the want of sincere love in the heart ... Whatever is done or suffered, yet if the heart is withheld from God, there is nothing really given to him.*

(Spending my summer memorizing entire books of the Bible, praying and fasting, but my sister Pam saw through my loveless spirit).

Summary of verses 1-3. Their advanced “spirituality” reeked with immaturity. Their “knowledge” led to pride and the “destruction of a brother for whom Christ died” (8:2, 11). Their “wisdom” led to quarrels and rivalry (1:10; 3:4). Their “tongues” were neither building up and encouraging the community nor helping those who didn’t know Christ to hear God’s word (14:1-25). In short, their spirituality lacked the primary evidence of the Spirit: love.

Conclusion:

(1) Does love mark your life? Is love your ultimate pursuit? This is the question. We can’t evade this. If it isn’t, then your life is a noisy gong. It adds up to a big fat zero. Do the people in my life say, “Love is his or her greatest pursuit?” In Philippians 2:4 Paul says that he wants us to behave as Jesus Christ behaved. In other words to love the same way that Jesus loved. And here is the way Jesus loved: “Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others.” You begin to think about other people and their interests just like you think about yourself and your interests.

There are many that make a profession and show of religion, and some that do many of the outward things which it requires, and possibly they may think that they have done and suffered much for God and his service. But the great inquiry is, has the heart been sincere in it all, and has all been suffered or done for the regard to the divine glory? God abominates the greatest things without sincerity, but he accepts of and delights in little things when they spring from sincere love to himself.

(2) Is love the defining mark of this community? The church in Corinth thought it was spiritually mature. They thought they had arrived. They thought they were gifted and special. They had knowledge and faith and dedication and even sacrifice. Paul responded by saying, first of all, “Yes, you are very special to God” (see 1:4-9). But then he also said, “Let’s also take a good, long look at reality. Look at your life together: is it marked by love? No, I see it riddled with factions, a critical spirit, selfishness and impatience.”

I love the way Jonathon Edwards puts it: *let us examine ourselves ... doubtless there are many nowadays, greatly to be rebuked for this, that though they have been so long in the school of Christ and under his teachings*

of the gospel, yet they still remain under a great misapprehension as to what kind of a spirit a truly Christian spirit is.

Edwards then quotes James 3: 16 (“Where envying and strife is, there is confusion and every evil work”) and warns us that every time our lives are marked by envy, gossip, a critical spirit, a factional spirit, the Christ-life within us will not grow. It chills and deadens it. So *watch strictly against all occasions of such a spirit, strive and fight to the utmost against such a temper...and avoid, as much as possible all temptations that may lead to it. An envious Christian, a malicious Christian, a cold and hardhearted Christian, is the greatest absurdity and contradiction. It is as if one should speak of dark brightness, or a false truth!*

Here’s a question to ponder: if the Spirit of God addressed our congregation today, what would God say to us? We don’t find over these spiritual gifts, so what are the hot button issues that chill and deaden the love of Christ among us? You can come up with your own list, but let me offer a few suggestions...

(3) Is love the message we send to the world? Story from McNeal.

If you call yourself a Christian, where are your works of love? Have you abounded, and do you abound in them? If this divine and holy principle is in you, and reigns in you, will it not appear in your life in works of love? Consider, what deeds of love have you done? Do not make excuse that you have not opportunities to do anything for the glory of God, for the interest of the Redeemer’s kingdom, and for the spiritual benefit of your neighbors. If your heart is full of love, it will find vent; you will find or make ways enough to express your love in deeds. When a fountain abounds in water, it will send forth streams.

(4) Do I really understand the Gospel of Jesus? Because when I truly understand the Gospel, when the message and the person of Jesus penetrate all my defenses and start to take root in my heart, love also takes root within me – and it grows and grows and grows – and it changes me from the inside out.

If persons have the true light of heaven let into their souls, it is not a light without heat. Divine knowledge and divine love go together. A spiritual view of divine things always excites love in the soul ... True discoveries of the divine character dispose us to love God as the supreme good; they unite the heart in love to Christ; they incline the soul to flow out in love to God’s people, and to all mankind. When persons have a true discovery of the excellency and sufficiency of Christ, this is the effect. When they experience a right belief of the truth of the gospel, such a belief is accompanied by love.