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A Still More Excellent Way

1 Corinthians 12:1-11, 26-31 and 1 Corinthians 13

THE READINGS

1 Corinthians 12:1-11, 26-31

Now concerning spiritual gifts, * brothers and sisters, * I do not want you to be uninformed. ²You know that when you were pagans, you were enticed and led astray to idols that could not speak. ³Therefore I want you to understand that no one speaking by the Spirit of God ever says 'Let Jesus be cursed!' and no one can say 'Jesus is Lord' except by the Holy Spirit.

⁴ Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; ⁵and there are varieties of services, but the same Lord; ⁶and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone. ⁷To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good. 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. ¹¹All these are activated by one and the same Spirit, who allots to each one individually just as the Spirit chooses...

²⁶If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honoured, all rejoice together with it. ²⁷ Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it. ²⁸And 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. ²⁹Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Are all teachers? Do all work miracles? ³⁰Do all possess gifts of healing? Do all speak in tongues? Do all interpret? ³¹But strive for the greater gifts. And I will show you a still more excellent way.

1 Corinthians 13 (Responsive)

ONE: IF I SPEAK IN THE TONGUES OF MORTALS AND OF ANGELS, BUT DO NOT HAVE LOVE,

MANY: I AM A NOISY GONG OR A CLANGING CYMBAL.

ONE: 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,

MANY: I AM NOTHING.

ONE: IF I GIVE AWAY ALL MY POSSESSIONS, AND IF I HAND OVER MY BODY SO THAT I MAY BOAST, BUT DO NOT HAVE LOVE,

MANY: I GAIN NOTHING.

MEN: LOVE IS PATIENT; LOVE IS KIND; LOVE IS NOT ENVOIOUS OR BOASTFUL OR ARROGANT OR RUDE.

WOMEN: IT DOES NOT INSIST ON ITS OWN WAY; IT IS NOT IRRITABLE OR RESENTFUL;

MEN: IT DOES NOT REJOICE IN WRONGDOING, BUT REJOICES IN THE TRUTH.

WOMEN: IT BEARS ALL THINGS, BELIEVES ALL THINGS, HOPES ALL THINGS, ENDURES ALL THINGS.

ALL: LOVE NEVER ENDS.

ONE: 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.

LEFT: FOR WE KNOW ONLY IN PART, AND WE PROPHECY ONLY IN PART; BUT WHEN THE COMPLETE COMES, THE PARTIAL WILL COME TO AN END.

ONE: 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.

RIGHT: 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.

ALL: AND NOW FAITH, HOPE, AND LOVE ABIDE, THESE THREE; AND THE GREATEST OF THESE IS LOVE.

SERMON:

On the Concord-Carlisle High School website there is a welcome that describes the school as “committed to excellence in and out of the classroom.” It continues: “Our mission is to inspire our students to strive for and meet the highest levels of academic and personal achievement, while nurturing a respectful, supportive, engaged, curious, and passionate learning community.”

“**Striving for excellence**” is a familiar concept to us all, I believe. Schools use this language, but so do the realms of business and management. Companies often describe themselves as committed to excellence whether their product is cars or cyber security. Medical institutions, too, say that they strive for excellence in diagnosis and care. Athletes and musicians all practice to achieve excellence, and we hope that all public servants and citizens are striving to be the best that they can be.

Paul, the author of this morning’s letter, wants the same for the church. He uses the words “strive” and “excel” throughout these three chapters, urging the Christians there in Corinth to reach for their

highest potential. He goes further to explain that the aim of excellence is why the Holy Spirit has allotted gifts to each of us in the church. You and I have certain qualities that seem to have been planted in us at an early age, interests and strengths that bring us joy when we discover them and exercise them in service to God’s greater purpose. These are manifestations of divine grace for the common good – spiritual gifts. The reading from Romans listed seven, and in 1 Corinthians, Paul adds nine more. You can read more about them on the printed insert in your bulletin, but this means that the Holy Spirit has gifted *you*, which in turn makes TriCon a gifted faith community striving for excellence.

So striving for excellence is a good thing, *except* when it is misunderstood and malpracticed. Spiritual gifts can be taken the wrong way. We can forget that they are *gifts* from *God* and *not* a result of our own merit or achievement. In the case of the Corinthians, for example, some in the church became infatuated with the gift of tongues – a private prayer language that the handful of members that had it flaunted publicly during the worship service. They began to think of their gift as more valuable than others and themselves superior. TriCon doesn’t have this particular problem. If *we* here err in the matter of spiritual gifts, it is not in looking down on others, but in *down*playing our own spiritual gifts. Either way, as the hymn puts it: this kind of striving is actually losing.¹

Striving for excellence can also be corrupted when we treat spiritual gifts as *goals* that *we* must achieve. Our culture influences us in this direction. Maybe you remember a children’s book called *Hope for the Flowers*?² Two caterpillars are trying to get to happiness, and at one point in their journey, following the crowd, they become a part of a tower of caterpillars frantically climbing upward, stepping on others to survive and get to the top of the heap.

Studies have shown that teenagers in our country are increasingly under pressure to get and stay ahead. One said her school environment felt like being told “to climb Mount Everest in high heels!” According to the National Institute of Mental Health, in 2015 about three million teens had suffered at least one major depressive episode in the prior year, and 6.3 million, an anxiety disorder.³ This kind of striving is actually losing.

We need a more excellent way! And this is what Paul proposes. In chapter thirteen, he puts forward a theological alternative to our over-striving society and an antidote to our abuse of excellence. **He declares that *love is our measuring stick and that in which we ought to excel.*** It is the Holy Spirit, the spirit of God in Christ, the spirit of love that gives us these spiritual gifts in the first place. They derive from love, are given in love, in order for us to love one another, and create a community of love on a mission of love in the world. Love looks at the other and says: “What is best for *you*?” Spiritual gifts then are to be received humbly and shared generously to the end of building others up.

Let’s say that you have the gifts of administration, organization, and leadership – the ability to make things happen and to go smoothly. If in the interest of getting things done, you inordinately push and pressure your colleagues into implementing your plan, you are not operating out of the *love* for which these gifts were given. Love serves as the corrective as we strive to excel.

The congregations that I researched for my doctoral dissertation worked diligently to create a new culture in which the lay and clergy leaders worked together as a team, in partnership, making the most of their gifts. In one place, there were three part-time lay associate pastors and one senior minister – not to mention the other elected lay leaders – and they impressed me with their collegiality. One of the

¹The allusion here is to *A Mighty Fortress Is Our God*, verse 2: “Did we in our own strength confide, our striving would

²Trina Paulus, *Hope For the Flowers* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1972).

³Susanna Schrobsdorff, “Teen Depression and Anxiety: Why the Kids Are Not Alright,” *Time*, October 27, 2016.

associates put it beautifully: “We don’t compete; we *complete*.” This is a church that has found the more excellent way of love.

When the church exercises its spiritual gifts to build up, I can only imagine that it will also contribute to the surrounding society. If a church has the gift of healing, for instance, and lives this out inside and out, people will notice that God is active there, *and* this community of faith will develop wisdom about healing that translates elsewhere, even maybe into the deliberations about health care that are now going on in our nation!

Given the pressures upon young people today, I am particularly taken with TriCon’s youth ministry. Teens are valued here, and their gifts encouraged, plus the program is about grace rather than guilt. Because the leaders exercise their gift of teaching in love and as mutual learning, the youth find a respite in the midst of their hectic schedules, healing some of the ills of growing up in this day and time, and this attracts others.

It’s wonderful that whenever you and I practice the more excellent way of love together, excellence is redefined, our spiritual gifts are fulfilled, and God’s love becomes tangible!