

The Church at its Best

Scripture: I Corinthians 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. 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. If I give away all my possessions, and if I hand over my body so that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing.

Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

Love never ends. 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. For we know only in part, and we prophesy only in part; but when the complete comes, the partial will come to an end. 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. 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. And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love.

Sermon: The Church at its Best

I remember once when I was a little girl, when my mother was making a chocolate cake from scratch. She had all these wonderful ingredients on the kitchen counter and all these lovely smells wafted around the room as she was busy whipping something up on the stove.

It was a pan half full of this lovely chocolate sauce and so naturally I asked for a taste. Mom told me that I could have some when it was ready - but of course I didn't want to wait, and insisted on having some right now! She said I wouldn't like it, but I didn't believe her - after all, here was this lovely chocolate sauce - and it smelled so good - and so, relenting, she gave me a taste.

And it was awful. It was bitter of course. It didn't taste like chocolate at all. Yet it looked like chocolate and my mother explained, that it was all chocolate and nothing but chocolate. And that was the problem with it - it was nothing but chocolate. It lacked a key ingredient needed to make it taste really good - it lacked sugar.

Well, that's what the church in Corinth was like some 2000 years ago when Paul wrote the letter to them that we heard from this morning.

Most of the believers in Corinth were extremely excited about their faith and what it meant to follow Jesus. There were people with tremendous gifts in the community:

there were teachers and healers, those who could pray eloquently,
those who could lead in worship, there were preachers and there were helpers.

The word of God was proclaimed every day and folk prayed and the gospel message was spreading. It seemed that everything you'd need for a vital church was happening in their midst - except for one thing!

The church failed the taste test.

It didn't have enough sugar in it.

It didn't have enough love in it.

It's fitting that we think about the church in the season of Epiphany, with the message of God coming to earth as Jesus in the flesh still fresh in our ears and minds. Because the best image we are given in the Bible for the church is the Body of Christ.

Jesus is the Body of God, so to speak; and the church, that's us, is the Body of Christ.

The title of the sermon today is "The church at its best," which is really what the love passage in Corinthians is all about. Even though we hear this passage most often at weddings (and more recently at funerals), it's important to know that the love Paul is talking about has nothing to do with married love. While it would be great if our marriages reflected this kind of love, that's not what Paul had in mind. He was holding up what life in the church ought to look like, because at the time he wrote this to them, the church in Corinth was acting like the church at its worst.

I've not been in this church a long time yet – just under 2 ½ years – and I've not seen this church at its worst. Some of you may have though. Or perhaps you have seen other churches at their worst and that's why you're here. It would be naïve of us to think that we, either as individuals or as a community, are exempt from the mistakes and hurts that come from life together.

And so, let's take off our rose-colored glasses for one minute and I'll tell a story of a church at its worst. (From the church I served in 1994) I was at a church council meeting and at that particular meeting there were a few people in the room who were not on the council who wanted to participate in the conversation – not an uncommon situation, since all meetings of the church (including this church) are open meetings and anyone is welcome to attend. I don't remember why Charlie came to this meeting, though it became apparent about an hour or so into it.

I can't remember the topic or what we were talking about, but I do remember Charlie rising to his feet, ranting about something in a raised voice, saying very mean things to the pastor, angrily pointing his finger at him as he spewed his anger at mostly the pastor, and then storming out.

What happened next was almost as shocking to me. While he was ranting, we all sort of hunkered down, and after he'd left, there was a big pause, a corporate sigh, and then the meeting picked up where it had left off, with no one saying a thing about what had happened. I was told afterward that, "yeah, Charlie has a temper."

A couple weeks later I was meeting with a mentor-like pastor who'd been a pastor a long time and I told him what had happened. And his reaction was shocking to me as well... He said, "You mean that no one in that church loves Charlie enough to tell him to stop that behavior?"

And in that question, I saw the church at its worst being challenged to be the church at its best.

If I speak in the tongues of mortals, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. Charlie was definitely a clanging cymbal and there was not much love going around.

That church was failing the “love test.”

As we think about love, I find it interesting, and not very helpful, that in the English language, we use the same word to describe how we feel about our favorite food as we do to describe how we feel about our children.

The ancient Greeks had at least 3 different words for love which we find in the New Testament.

Friendship love – or brotherly love – *philia* – (Philadelphia)

Erotic love – physical attraction – *eros*

Unconditional love – self-sacrificing love – *agape*

And the love that Paul is writing about here is *agape* love. This is how God loves us and how we ought to love each other in the church.

The folk at the church in Corinth were definitely struggling in the love department.

Despite all the wonderful things that were going in their midst, despite all the spiritual wisdom that seemed to be around the place, despite all the faith that folk claimed to have, there were still things going on in the community which were getting in the way of the church really being the Body of Christ:

- When they would gather for the meals that they held in memory of Jesus: some ate too much, some drank too much, and others went hungry;
- There were public disagreements about which of the apostles and teachers who had come to Corinth were the best - and which were worst;
- There were some who believed that their contribution to the church was more significant than the contributions being made by others - and that their views on things should be considered first because of that;
- While others felt like they weren't important to God or the church at all because they didn't have the gifts, or the talents, or the wealth to offer that they thought they should have.

In short, people in Corinth were, at times rude to one another, impatient, arrogant, greedy, selfish, egotistical, and unkind...even though people were healed at their meetings, the word of God was proclaimed, and people were clothed and fed and prayed for.

And just as the bitter chocolate of my childhood was not really chocolate without the sugar, so also the church is not really the church without love.

It's like the doctor who is gifted and skilled in their field, but doesn't have a kind bedside manner. How helpful is all that knowledge, when it's not communicated kindly?

Love, Paul is saying, is the test of our faith. Folks know we are Christians by our love and they know that we are something less than fully Christian - by our lack of it.

But this agape love, Christian love, is different from emotional, human love. Christian love places God first - neighbor second, and self, last. Love is being more interested in the well-being of others than our own. It is seeing everyone through the lens of Christ and treating them as Christ has treated us.

In many ways, we are like the church in Corinth – gifted by God with talents and abilities and spiritual gifts that can and do build up this community.

We have those who sing praise to God and lift all our hearts; we have those who learn the Word of God and share it with others (gifts of teaching), and those who are organized and articulate; those who bring comfort and create joy with food - and get-well cards - and well-timed phone calls; we have those with the gifts of prayer - and of service.

When I look around, I do see the love of God shared widely both amongst us and beyond us.

But are we there yet? Can anyone or any church ever reach the goal of love that Paul sets before us? Have we managed to fulfill all that Christ asks of us when we follow him?

Let us take the test – Paul's love test. Because remember this is how we ought to be with one another here at church. So, listen again to these familiar words – but imagine them applying to how you interact at the committee you serve on, or the small group you're a part of, or the mission activity you participated in, or a casual conversation with a church friend about the church or fellow parishioners....

We are patient. We are kind.

We are not envious or boastful, arrogant or rude.

We do not insist on our own way.

We are not irritable or resentful.

We do not rejoice in wrongdoing but rejoice in the truth.

We bear all things. We believe all things. We hope all things.

We endure all things.

Try reading this passage as devotions at the beginning of your committee meeting or gathering at church.

A colleague of mine says that he's not impressed when people say that they don't need to go to church to find God, that they see God in nature. That's not much of a statement or a claim – it's easy to see God in nature. The true wonder is that God can be found inside the church, among

quirky, flawed and broken people who may have little in common and yet are bound to one another. (Martin Copenhaver)

And God is found here among us. Because the church is God's creation, not something merely formed by the agreement or decisions of human beings – that's why it is called the Body of Christ.

Don't feel loving? Do the caring thing anyway.

Don't feel like being kind? Say something nice about the person who is being rude to us anyway;

Don't think that someone else's plan will work and that your idea is better? Let them do it anyway;

Don't think you can possibly do what God is calling you to do? Start doing it anyway.

Or as Paul puts it: *Earnestly strive for the greater gifts - the greatest of which is love.*

Amen.