“The Greatest Thing”

1 Corinthians 13:1-13

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One of the challenges of reading Paul’s letters in the New Testament, is that we’re only hearing one side of the conversation.

It’s a bit like listening to someone talk on the phone.

We catch enough to mostly know what the conversation is about, but not enough to really understand.

We grasp for straws, as we put the pieces together.

It doesn’t help that this letter was written over 2,000 years ago.

However, Paul, in his brilliant rhetorical manner, writes in a way that we get a relatively clear understanding of what the Corinthians were up to.

He responds to their questions about marriage, and idols and how to conduct the Lord’s Supper.

Evidently they were struggling with these topics.

And as we heard last week, their primary struggle was with divisions in the church.

These early followers of Christ were having a hard time getting along.

Looking to Paul for help, the church leaders wrote and asked what to do about it.

In Paul’s wonderfully pastoral way, he responds and offers guidance.

He addresses their questions, acknowledges their struggle.

It can be hard to be the church, he affirms.

This morning we hear Paul’s reflections on how to solve the challenges of church division.

Let us continue to listen for the Word of God, in 1 Corinthians chapter 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.

Shortly after graduating from college, my friends and I were bombarded with invitations to weddings.

Having finished school, several of our friends decided it was a good time to get married.

That summer I was invited to 6 weddings, and had to turn down 2 invitations because they were on the same day as another wedding.

As my friends and I made the rounds to these weddings, we jokingly placed bets about certain parts of the ceremony.

When you go to a lot of weddings, they tend to have similar features.

We’d try to predict what color the bride’s maid’s dresses would be.

What kind of food would be served at the reception.

Whether or not the DJ would play that obnoxious song played at all wedding receptions.

But our favorite wager, was in regard to the readings during the ceremony.

We loved trying to predict which passage of scripture would be used.

And 9 times out of 10, it was this passage from 1 Corinthians.

It seems appropriate, given how much it talks about love.

A key element to a healthy marriage.

But us Bible nerds would always snicker when we heard it read at a wedding.

Because we knew the context behind the passage.

Now, this passage is perfectly fine to read at a wedding.

But as we read it here in church, we have to recognize that Paul is not talking about romantic love.

He’s not talking about the head over heels, ooey gooey kind of love.

If we turn back a few pages, we see what Paul is talking about.

Just before this passage we read this morning, he speaks of the body of Christ.

He uses that metaphor to describe the church, reminding the church folk that each person has a role that is different from all of the others.

The trouble in Corinth was that they got into the habit of valuing certain roles over others.

They seemed to put certain people on a pedestal, saying they were more worthy than others.

The role they seem to zero in on, is speaking in tongues.

They decided that was the most respected spiritual gift.

Anyone who was not capable of it, was not worthy of respect.

As we read Paul’s response, we hear him point out the ways they’ve been behaving.

Chapter 13 highlights some of these behaviors:

They were impatient with one another.

They were unkind to each other.

They were envying each other’s gifts and boasting about their own.

They were arrogant and they were rude.

They tried to insist on their own way.

They got irritable with one another and resentful.

The members of the church in Corinth were skilled in putting each other down.

I have to wonder if this behavior was partly due to the stress they were under.

It was not easy being a Christian during the Roman rule.

They faced persecution on a daily basis.

Maybe being bullied from others turned them into bullies.

There have been studies conducted to study this behavior.

Social psychologists have found that “prejudice and negative evaluations often come from our own need to maintain high feelings of self-worth. The more we feel that our self-image is threatened, the more likely we will put others down in order to regain a positive self-image.”[[1]](#footnote-1)

In one experiment, participants were given a test, and then given fake results.

For half of the group, they were told they scored very high on the test.

The other half was told they scored very low.

They then had the participants evaluate the personalities of other people.

Some of the people were just like them, and some of the people were outsiders, people of a different race or culture or political party.

As predicted, the people who were told they scored high on the test, evaluated everyone positively.

They had nice things to say about everyone.

And, the people who were told they scored low on the test, acted as expected.

They said nice things about the people who were like them, but had negative things to say about the people who weren’t like them.

What this tells us, is that when we have low self-esteem, when we are feeling insecure,

We look to those who are different than us and put them down to make ourselves feel better.

This behavior is perhaps most evident on the internet.

If you’ve ever read the comment section of an article or Facebook post, you know what I’m talking about.

People use this semi-anonymous forum to be ugly to one another.

I was a member of a new mom’s forum online, and greatly appreciated the support and insight.

But I was disappointed when the administrators shut the forum down, because the participants were being so mean to each other.

It seemed to me, that these new moms were so insecure about their own parenting decisions, that they felt better when they could criticize others.

Parenting is a vulnerable role in life, one that makes us question ourselves and our decisions.

For some, it makes them feel better to put others down.

And the sad thing is, it works.

Putting others down actually makes us feel better about ourselves.

But at what cost?

What happens when we are self-serving, trying to make ourselves feel good by hurting others?

What happens when we behave this way within the church?

Gossiping about other members, and putting them down for the way they act, or dress, or speak.

As we see here in 1 Corinthians, it can lead to major trouble.

The Corinthian Church was in shambles, because the members couldn’t stop putting each other down.

They felt so insecure about their faith and their spiritual gifts, that the only way to make themselves feel better was by being rude and irritable to each other.

Here’s where Paul steps in to intervene.

He acknowledges their struggle.

He recognizes how hard it is to get along,

How hard it is to be a Christian in that time.

And then he offers a better way.

He calls then to rise above their petty behavior and instead pursue love.

Using himself as an example, he tells them, if I were so great with all of these gifts and talents, but didn’t have love – I’d all be for nothing.

I could be the smartest, most faithful person, but without love my wisdom and faith would get me nowhere.

Paul tells them that their gifts are meaningless if they aren’t living in a loving manner.

We hear echoes of Jesus’ call to love our neighbors as ourselves.

That challenging commandment he gives us.

Paul declares that the way to get along.

The way to be the church, is to root ourselves in love.

To do this, we must see each person as a child of God.

We must see that imago dei, that image of God in each person.

If we can manage to look past the things that annoy us or offend us, we’ll see that each person is a beautiful glimpse at God.

We see that each person was knit together by God’s love.

That the force of love that is our creator, carefully crafted each human being.

God put so much effort into creating each one of us.

So much time and effort.

We must recognize that each person is worthy of love.

Each person is worthy of our love.

Paul calls us to remember this.

He imparts this wisdom upon us, calling us to be patient.

To be kind. To not envy or boast. To not be arrogant or rude.

To consider other ways.

To not be irritable or resentful.

To not rejoice in the wrongdoing of others.

This task of loving all people, to genuinely follow these words of Paul, is a challenge.

It is harder to choose this route.

But when we do, we find that all of us are better for it.

It is true that putting others down makes us feel better about ourselves.

But an even more effective boost comes from lifting one another up.

When we say nice words through a compliment, or do nice things through acts of service, we feel better about ourselves.

This is because when we love another person, we affirm God’s love for them and for ourselves.

We strengthen our community by loving each other.

The greatest thing, the most important thing, the thing we cannot live without, is love.

In everything that we do, whether in the church or outside the church,

Let us love one another as God has loved us. Amen.

1. Disunity in Christ… [↑](#footnote-ref-1)