

2/3/2019

“The Most Excellent Way to Live”

Scripture: 1 Corinthians 12:31b-13:13

Fourth Sunday after the Epiphany

Theme: Though we are given various gifts of the Holy Spirit, we are all called and encouraged to live by love.

1 Corinthians 12:31b-13:13

“Now eagerly desire the greater gifts. And yet I will show you the most excellent way. If I speak in the tongues of men or of angels, but do not have love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal. If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have a faith that can move mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. If I give all I possess to the poor and give over my body to hardship that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing.

Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It does not dishonor others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs.

Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth.

It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres.

Love never fails. But where there are prophecies, they will cease; where there are tongues, they will be stilled; where there is knowledge, it will pass away.

For we know in part and we prophesy in part, but when completeness comes, what is in part disappears.

When I was a child, I talked like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I put the ways of childhood behind me.

For now we see only a reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known.

And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love.”

I’m sure you know and have seen or heard in today’s world, as always really, there are many ways to live. It could be referring to one quality or another. Some may even use the expression, “Now that’s the way to live!”

In the words from I Corinthians 12 and 13, the apostle Paul was addressing early followers of Jesus in the church in Corinth, Greece. Some were coming from the Jewish faith as Paul had and others from the pagan Gentile culture. The Christians there were eagerly desiring to receive the gifts of the Holy Spirit.

As can be seen from reading the previous chapter, Paul teaches them that all who profess faith in Jesus are gifted with and by the Holy Spirit. And, all those gifts are important and given by the Spirit for the common good. In and through baptism, all are made part of the body of Christ, given the Spirit to build up one another, and to share in God's purpose and plan for us.

Now, I don't know of anyone here using their spiritual gift in vanity or pride. If anything, some may be shy or reluctant to acknowledge or use them. Paul reminds us to both seek and use those gifts. And in so doing, remember that all are needed. With as many wonderful ministries that we have, there are still some that are in need of members and others to fulfill them.

Paul would further have the members of that community of faith, and all followers of Christ including us here, realize what he calls "a still more excellent way" or "*the most excellent way*" depending on the translation.

The most excellent way, as I understand Paul saying, **is the way of Christ's love**. It is the most excellent way for us to be the body of Jesus Christ within our congregation, within our community, within our denomination, and with other believers around the world. It is also the most excellent way for us to live -- to be true followers of Jesus within our home and family, within our workplaces, and elsewhere.

It is the way of patience, kindness and cooperation. It is the way of gentleness, peace, and self-control. It is joyful in hearing and telling the truth. For the gift of love from the Holy Spirit can be used and helpful anywhere. It can make a difference for good in any person's life.

And as Paul says, even if we have all the other gifts, but don't have love, then we are still nothing and have gained nothing. Paul is primarily speaking in terms of spiritual growth and reward. But it can also be said of the community of faith or church as a whole. It can also be said of us as individuals, as couples, as families, as friends, as co-workers, as larger communities in which we live.

Friends, I believe you already know that one can have all the trappings of worldly "success" – family, friends, followers on Facebook . . . one can have a nice home or two, a good job or career, a fancy car, SUV or truck, boats, money in the bank, or whatever. But, if we don't have truly loving relationships, what is all the rest worth? Nothing really. Nothing at all.

And when there is love – Christ’s love – it can make all the difference in someone’s life. Indeed, it can make all the difference in the world.

Let me share just one example . . . Elizabeth K. Bush of Maine shared in The Upper Room (UR, 10/20/16):

“First Corinthians 13 is a favorite scripture of mine, and I wanted to read it at my son’s wedding. Uncomfortable with public speaking but wanting to give this reading as a gift to the newlyweds, I began preparing by reading it aloud every morning to my husband, Paul. And every morning, he joined me in saying the last few words: “and the greatest of these is love.”

As the wedding day drew closer, my husband’s health began to deteriorate quickly. It soon became clear that he would not be able to attend the wedding. He needed assistance with bathing, eating, and dressing. Putting on a shirt often left him out of breath. He was grateful for the help I gave him, and he expressed his appreciation often. We found ourselves quoting to each other words from the scripture: “Love is patient; love is kind.”

Ten days after the wedding, my husband passed away. My new daughter-in-law read 1 Corinthians 13 at his service. I learned in those days that love is a true gift from God.”

We come together today as a family and community of faith to celebrate Holy Communion. We remember the One, our Lord Jesus, who taught, showed and demonstrated for us the most excellent Way to live. And he demonstrated what he said was the greatest love a person could have . . . to lay down his life for one’s friends.

He invites you this day to come as you are, to receive that love, to celebrate the gifts of the Holy Spirit, which are freely given to you. And to use those gifts in loving service to other people, so that God may be glorified in you.

So, come. Come to the table of love in celebration of the most excellent Way.

+ + +

Questions for Reflection:

What gifts of the Holy Spirit have you received?

In what ways do you use them?

How do you feel most challenged, and most rewarded, in living by Christ’s love – the most excellent way?

