

February 14, 2021

Message

Texts: 1 Corinthians 13

Mark 1:29-39

It is almost impossible in our mind, to separate this text (1 Corinthians 13) from weddings. It is one of the most often-used scriptures in that setting. But it is important to remember that this letter is written to a church.

Paul sent this letter to the church in Corinth during a pastoral crisis. The Corinthian Christians are abusing their freedom, refusing to share, scorning their neighbors' spiritual gifts, boasting in their own gifts, seeking recognition for themselves, and jockeying for position in the church. The problem in Corinth is not the lack of spiritual gifts, but the ways in which these gifts are exercised.

Paul challenges the Corinthians to examine their actions with a simple command: practice love. Love is not another spiritual gift, but the way in which God intends us to practice all of our gifts. In this text, Paul speaks about the primacy of love, the character of love, and the endurance of love.

In every faith community, and in every human life, there are spoken and unspoken assumptions about what is most important. Any church is full of diverse theological viewpoints, programs, small groups, organizations, missions, and specialized ministries. Most of the time, these coexist peacefully. When resources (money, people, space, time) are scarce, though, tensions rise and unspoken assumptions are sometimes verbalized in hurtful and divisive ways. Social and cultural concerns press upon the church and lead some within the church to insist on their own way. When this happens, Christians seem to have a special gift for cloaking self-interest with self-righteousness.

These words from Paul on the primacy of love can help the church understand that there are some things more important than being right or powerful or honored. If those with the church do not do what they do in a spirit of love, then all religious talk, knowledge, piety, and sacrificial giving add up to nothing. Without love, Christians are like the salt Jesus described as having lost its savor and not good for anything. Those who think they have gained everything by standing on principle, dominating others, or by being right, have lost it all.

Paul also speaks about the character of love. Christians are bombarded every day with countless and often conflicting images and ideas of love. Paul is speaking about agape love the love embodied most visibly in God's love for humankind in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. This love is not a feeling, but an action. This love seeks not its own good, but the good of the one who is loved. Paul's description of the character of love awakens believers to the transformation and renewal of love in the body of Christ – the church.

It is helpful to explore how we the church go about certain ministries. What about pastoral care? Sometimes in the church, those engaged in this ministry become irritable or impatient when those receiving care do not change or conform to the caregivers' expectations. Well-meaning but

misguided individuals often think they know what is best for others and become frustrated when others do not immediately respond to their suggestions and plans.

What about missions? Do those of us involved in community and global missions press our own agenda on those we serve, or do we truly join in a respectful partnership with others as we listen together for the Spirit's guidance and leading?

What about organizational leadership? Are officers trained to exercise leadership in a spirit of love that seeks the good of all and rejoices when the broadest understanding of truth is reached?

There is nothing sentimental about the kind of love Paul sets before the church. This love is active, tough, resilient, and long-suffering.

Paul ends his words with a picture of the endurance of love. Every spiritual gift will end. All the monuments humans create will crumble away. Even human life will come to an end. In this life, humans are given the opportunity to grow in love, from childhood to adulthood and from immaturity to full spiritual maturity. There is a beautiful irony in the fact that the one thing that lasts forever is the love that is given away. In an anxious world that grasps for the permanent, the eternal is given through the experience of love. The faithful life is one that gives testimony in word and deed to the primacy of love, the character of love, and the endurance of love.

It might sound like this message is intended to "beat up on" the church, or make people feel bad. Not at all! It is an examination of the kind of love Christians are capable of in gathered community. If we can practice this active, tough, resilient, long-suffering love together in our gathered community, imagine what could happen if this love were unleashed upon the world outside our churches, if we could, indeed, not only show the world we are Christians by our love; but show the world how to practice that love everywhere. Ponder that vision for just a second!

Gerald May offers a vision of love that is healing – healing of just about anything, he claims. He says this: "God's grace through community involves something far greater than other people's support and perspective. The power of grace is nowhere as brilliant nor as mystical as in communities of faith. Its power includes not just love that comes from people and through people but love that pours forth among people, as if through the very spaces between one person and next. Just to be in such an atmosphere is to be bathed in healing power.

What might it mean for the church to be bathed in healing power and to practice a love that brings this about? What might it mean for our thirsty, hungry, hurting world?