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A Still More Excellent Way
Or: "No, This Isn't a Wedding"

a sermon on 1 Corinthians 13
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When I was reading our scripture, did you feel as if you were at a wedding? I have presided at enough weddings now that I have lost count, but I do know that only three of them did not have a reading of 1 Corinthians 13. Almost every wedding you go to, there it is. It has become as traditional as "Here Comes the Bride," a white dress, and a nervous bride and groom. You can see why it's popular. It is eloquent, almost poetic; it praises love; and honestly if a couple treats each other as it describes, their marriage ought to be successful and reasonably happy.

But just so you know, that's not what this chapter is about. It is not about romantic love (though you could argue that marriage isn't either, at least it is about a whole lot more). But 1 Corinthians 13 is not about a man and a woman. It is about church — that is, Christian community. In fact, it is much more appropriate at an ordination service than a wedding.

If you want to know what the famous chapter on love is about, you have to read it in context. What comes right before and right after it? Paul did not write in chapters. He just wrote letters. Chapter and verse divisions were put in later for convenience. So this little chapter is not something all by itself. It functions as part of a larger whole, and until you get the big picture, you won't realize what it's about. What is 1 Corinthians about? Why did Paul write? What is he trying to do? Once you get the big picture, the details fall into place.

In chapter 12, just before our reading on love, Paul wrote about spiritual gifts. He says there are many spiritual gifts, but they all come from one source, the Holy Spirit. Then he says that believers are all one body, the body of Christ, joined organically together. You should be familiar with this famous image. He talks about how the body would be in serious trouble if every part were an eye, and how the eye cannot say to the hand, "I don't need you." Are you beginning to see where he is going with this and how the part about love fits in?

Now look at chapter 14, just after our reading. He's back talking about spiritual gifts again. His point is that spiritual gifts should be used to build up individual believers

and the body. So where does love fit into this? Apparently it was the only gift the Corinthians lacked!

First Corinthians is a fairly long letter. In it Paul addresses a host of problems that church was having. Some of them they recognized and wanted his help. Others they didn't see a problem, but it was obvious to Paul and should have been obvious to them. Here's the situation in a nutshell: They were badly divided. The church was full of cliques, but worse still were the socio-economic distinctions. Money mattered in that church. Those who had it tended to treat badly those who did not. Also, the congregation was immature. You can see this in many of the things Paul has to say to them. One way immaturity came out was, everything was a competition. Everyone wanted honor. Everyone wanted to be the best. They were a bunch of show-offs. Do you know what is worse than a jerk who has to prove he is better than everyone else so he's a show-off? A Christian show-off who who brags about his holiness and knowledge and spiritual gifts. I have known a few like that, and let me tell you, they are insufferable. You can't stand to be around people like that. It is as if God gave them every spiritual gift in heaven except humility ... and love. Imagine a whole congregation like that. Would you go to that church?

They had a serious problem. Paul tries here to set them straight, but before we move on to what he said, you need to know one more thing about the Corinthians, because this will help you when you try to figure out what God is saying to you. The Corinthian Christians came by their problems honestly. They got them from their culture. Roman Corinth in the first century was a society based on wealth, class, and honor. The social structure was as dense and rigid as Middle School is in our culture. Do you remember Middle School? If you are my age or older, things are worse now than we remember. Remember the cliques? Remember the cool kids who could only maintain their veneer of coolness by excluding others? At the top you had the athletes and cheerleaders and kids with money. At the bottom was that shifty guy with no friends who painted his fingernails black. Then you had me. I tried to befriend that guy, but he thought hanging out with me would hurt his reputation. The Christians in Corinth lived in that world, and they brought it with them into the church without thinking about what they were doing.

Roman Corinth in the first century was highly competitive, as you can imagine. Being number 2 simply meant that you were the best loser. Being number 1 was all that mattered. Sound familiar? They had totally lost Jesus' attitude of service. Instead church was one more place they had to out-do one another. Knowledge was highly prized in their culture, and so they assumed that knowing more meant you are closer to God. They hoarded so-called spiritual knowledge because they thought it made them better than other people. As you can see, their problems came from their culture. That was all they knew. But God does things differently. Paul knew they had to change.

They needed a kingdom attitude, a Jesus attitude. He tries to set them straight in our scripture reading.

Their basic problem was a lack of love. If you have love, you can overcome a lot of faults. Without love ... well, Paul says it better than I can. Chapter 13 has three main parts, vv. 1-3, 4-8a, and 8b-13. You are going to see how personal this is. It is not about love in the abstract. It is about love in the concrete. Love is always concrete. Love is always action. This is about the Corinthians and about Paul.

In the first section, he talks about a variety of spiritual gifts and how they are worthless without love: tongues, prophecy, wisdom, knowledge, faith to move mountains, service to others, and even dying for the sake of the gospel. These are all things the Corinthians cared about. They thought nothing is more important than these gifts. They obsessed about them. They bragged about them. If you had these, they thought you were somebody important. Paul shoots them down. Not because they are bad, but because without love, they amount to nothing. And Paul should know, because these were all gifts Paul had. He claims he spoke in tongues. He prophesied. He certainly had wisdom and knowledge. He worked for a living even when he did not have to in order to not be a burden on his churches and to help others. He organized a big collection for the needy Christians in Jerusalem. On numerous occasions he was beaten, once so badly he was left for dead, because of his preaching. As for moving mountains, Paul is reported to have worked miracles. So he knows and the Corinthians know that Paul has all these gifts he is talking about. And what does he say? Without love "I *am* nothing" and "I *gain* nothing." O! Paul hit them right in the gut.

In the second section, he talks about what love is and what it is not. Again, this is not abstract. Everything he says love is, the Corinthians are not. Everything he says love is not, they are. We could go back through the letter and pick out examples of how they were impatient, rude, boastful, and all the rest. We don't have time for that, but we could. Paul was a master craftsman of words and ideas. While he praises love, he reminds them of all that they are not but should be. And the words he uses to describe love are all verbs. They are action words. Not an adjective in the pack. Don't miss that. Love is action. Love always takes the form of action. Love is not a feeling. The feeling you have is important, and it can motivate loving deeds; but love itself is the deed. Love is how you treat other people. And of course we all know this. I've said this before many times. When you tell someone, "I love you," they hear it as a promise about how you are going to treat them. If you do them wrong, what do they say? "But you said you love me!"

"I love you" is a promise and love is action. In scripture, God's love is always an action. Supremely, God's love took the form of the cross. "This is how God loved the world: he gave his only begotten Son." Love is action, or you are just kidding yourself. ...

Verse 7 bothers me. It claims: “Love bears all things, believes all things.” That makes love sound gullible. Worse, it calls to mind a battered wife who stays to take more abuse because she has some warped idea about what love is. I don’t want you to hear this verse and think that’s what it means. God does not like it when his children are abused. To understand this verse, we need to look again at Paul. Throughout his career as a missionary, he endured all kinds of suffering. He kept going. He never gave up. He never lost faith. When his churches, like this one in Corinth, got all messed up, he did not turn his back on them. He patiently worked to get them right. That’s what this is talking about. If you want to apply it to families today, think of the parent who continues to love and pray for a wayward child, not enabling their destructive behavior, but offering them hope and a chance to turn around. Love is not naïve and soft; love is wise and strong. Real love is anyway.

At last we reach the last section. Paul is trying to convince them – and us – that love is the greatest spiritual gift. He argues that only love will last into eternity. All the others are good while we need them, but someday we won’t need them anymore. We will set them aside as a grown man puts away childish things. Even faith and hope don’t last forever. Right now we need faith. We have to trust God’s promises. We believe he will raise us to eternal life if we belong to Jesus Christ. After he does that, and we see him face to face, ... well, you don’t need faith when you can see things with your own eyes. Love, however, is different. Love will last forever. In heaven we will love one another. There we will be able to love perfectly, just as God does. That’s one of the greatest blessings of heaven. You’ve never really lived until you have loved with a perfect love. In heaven, the other spiritual gifts end up as museum pieces. Love just gets better and better.

I suppose by now I have convinced you that 1 Corinthians 13 ought to be read at ordinations rather than weddings, though we can go on reading it at weddings too. That won’t hurt anything, so long as we know what’s really going on. The last question I need to answer then is, so what? What does this have to do with us?

Rather than try to tell you, I am going to give you a test. That’s right, a test. I start studying for a doctorate and suddenly I’m giving tests like a professor. Actually, this is a different kind of test. What I want you to do is this: When you have a quiet moment, read 1 Corinthians 13.4-8a and *replace the word love with your name*. If you were I, you would say, “David is patient; David is kind ...” and so on. Read it through or write it out that way. Then ask yourself, “How accurate is this?” Is this describing me, or does it sound like a joke? This test will not be graded, but participants will have the chance to repent and pray afterwards. Pray for God to increase in you the gift of love.

I want you. Correct that. *God* wants you to use the spiritual gifts he has given you for ministry. God has given you abilities that you can use to serve others in his name. He expects you to do it. Not only you elders and deacons, but all of us. Use your gifts

unselfishly. You must have love. Love holds everything together and makes our gifts effective. You must love God. You must love this church. You must love the people who make up this church. And you must love our community, our city, its people. If you do not, you are playing a game. You're a fake, a fraud. Without love, you are nothing and you gain nothing. That's not my opinion. That's the Word of God.

God has given you love to share with others. Pray that he will increase in you the gift of love, and cultivate it. Love is like a muscle. The more you use it, the more it grows. Amen.

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