

But strive for the greater gifts. And I will show you a still more excellent way. 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. ²And 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. ³If I give away all my possessions, and if I hand over my body so that I may boast,^[a] but do not have love, I gain nothing.

⁴Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant ⁵or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; ⁶it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. ⁷It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

⁸Love 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. ⁹For we know only in part, and we prophesy only in part; ¹⁰but when the complete comes, the partial will come to an end. ¹¹When 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. ¹²For now we see in a mirror, dimly,^[b] 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. ¹³And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love

This is the word of the Lord

FIRST READING

John 15:12-17

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¹²“This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. ¹³No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends. ¹⁴You are my friends if you do what I command you. ¹⁵I do not call you servants^[c] any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father. ¹⁶You did not choose me but I chose you. And I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last, so that the Father will give you whatever you ask him in my name. ¹⁷I am giving you these commands so that you may love one another.

This is the word of the Lord.

“The More Excellent Way”

The church was about 5 years old in Corinth when Paul sent his letter. Because the church had grown since its founding, the people, maybe as many as 200, were now having to meet in various small groups, cells, house churches. The groups were physically separated from each other in their worshiping. In addition, there was great diversity in their midst, differences in economic levels, social status, education...differences in whether slave or free, woman or man, young or old...differences in cultural and religious backgrounds (Gentile or Jew). And because of these things, the Corinthian church was struggling to be unified. Conflicts arose, manifesting themselves in their allegiance to different leaders (Paul, Apollos or Cephus), social divisions at the Lord’s Table, boasting over spiritual gifts, etc.

So, Paul wrote. He wrote to the church to teach and encourage them to act as a COMMUNITY of faith, the body of Christ. While his words are beautifully poetic, and they resonate with any reader’s soul whether reading 5 years, 500 or 2000 years later, Paul didn’t write them for the poets or the song writers, or romantics, or politicians, or the teddy bear industry, or Hallmark, or brides and grooms. No, they weren’t written for weddings, although that’s certainly where we hear them the most. He wrote them for the Church, the Church which was and so often is covered in the messiness of factional fighting, the church which has for all time been trying to learn, sometimes more successfully than others, what it means to live as a community faithful to the Gospel.¹

These words came after Paul had set the stage. Earlier in the letter, chapter 12, he reminded the believers about the variety of gifts which they had, spiritual gifts which GOD gave them, gifts of prophesy, healing, working miracles, speaking in tongues. He reminded them that these gifts were all equally important, and that they were assigned to the work of the Church, Christ’s church! *“To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good.”* Then he reminded them that they all had purpose and belonged together just as members of a body belonged together, as arms, feet, eyes and ears. The body they were part of was the body of

¹ David Davis. Sermon: *“After the Wedding March”* <http://cep.calvinseminary.edu/audio-sermons/after-the-wedding-march-a-sermon-from-i-corinthians-13-by-david-davis/> (accessed 8-25-17).

Christ. And finally, he told them they needed to consequently live differently. *“I will show you a still more excellent way,”* he said. They needed to try to live like Jesus did. They needed to EMBODY him. They needed to be like the One who lived his life on behalf of others, who gave his life away.

Paul went on to explain that this more excellent way was a way of faith, hope and love, the greatest of these was love, for this is the characteristic which is the most Jesus-like. *“For love,”* he said, *“is patient and kind, not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It doesn’t insist on its own way, isn’t irritable or resentful. It doesn’t rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.* Ultimately, Paul told the Corinthians that being like Jesus, being love, would allow them to live as one, as Christians together, it was love that would give meaning to things such as prophesy, knowledge, healing or speaking in tongues, and it was love which would bring God’s new world to this one, the world which has no end.² This was the more excellent way.

Rev. Michael Lindvall, in his book, Leaving New Haven, writes of such a love in a body of faith. He tells of being a pulpit supply preacher in a little church in the dying town of Carthage Lake, MN. The church hadn’t had a minister of its own since 1939, but a handful of people continued to gather once a month for Sunday school and worship with whatever preacher they could convince to come. He was told by a Board member, Lloyd, that there were only 11 members, but that he could expect that all would be there. When Michael arrived, he found a small white frame building, with large stained-glass window of Jesus, the Good Shepherd, over the door, and two cars and a pick up out front. There were actually 12 worshipers, including a young thin man. Worship began and Michael announced the opening hymn, “Spirit of the Living God”. Agnes, the organist for the past 60 years, smiled at him and played instead “What a Friend We Have in Jesus.” The 11 elderly members sang by memory. Only the young man used a hymnal. Later, Michael announced another hymn, “Love Divine, All Loves Excelling.” He looked directly at Agnes, who smiled back and played, “I Love to Tell the Story.” For the

² NT. Wright. *“Paul for Everyone: 1 Corinthians”* (Louisville: WJKP;2003),177.

*third hymn, Michael walked over to the organ bench, bent down and whispered, "Agnes, what are we going to sing?" She smiled and began to play, "Just as I am, Without one Plea." After worship, Lloyd explained, "I forgot to tell you about Agnes. Agnes only knows those 3 hymns, so we always sing 'em." "Good grief," Michael said, "you mean to tell me you've been singing the same three hymns for 60 years?" "We like the hymns well enough, and we know 'em by heart...And well, she's our organist." Later, Michael met the young man, Neil, Lloyd's grandson, who explained further, "Agnes is my late grandmother's little sister. She's never been quite right, never says more than a few words, but about 60 years ago, when the regular organist got sick, she learned to play those hymns in a period of 1 week. She's never been able to learn another since. Playing the organ one Sunday a month means the world to her."*³(pause)

"Faith, hope and love abide, but the greatest of these is love," Paul wrote to the church in Corinth. In Greek, the word for the love he described is *agape*. It is one of 4 kinds of love, the others being *eros, philos and storge*.⁴ It is defined as having an attitude of self-giving, of selflessness, of considering the OTHER and their needs before one's own. It has little to do with feelings or emotion, but instead with how people relate to one another, in community.

Loving with *agape* love is what we're doing when we sit with a lonely neighbor, stand up for someone being wronged, pray with the sick friend, pick up groceries for the homebound, when we patiently listen to the child, welcome the stranger, or make a caring casserole. It is what we're doing when we make snack packs for the homeless and hungry, or encourage mission co-workers in a foreign land. It is what is offered when we directly or indirectly help in a place stricken by disaster...an earthquake, a fire, ...or a hurricane! *I was reading on the PDA website this week and I was touched by the stories...the story of a woman who was starving after a tsunami because her livelihood was gone, but then was given equipment by PDA to make bread and pastries...the story of a man who was benefitting 10 years after a storm from PDA's planting of mangroves, mangroves which now serve to break the waves and stop erosionand the story of a church in NC which, after surviving Hurricane Matthew, took all of the left over*

³Michael Lindvall, *Leaving North Haven: The Further Adventures of a Small-Town Pastor* (Danvers, MA: Crossroads Pub; 2002)

⁴ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Four_Loves

muddy sandbags provided by PDA and piled them up in the shape of a Christmas tree. They then put lights and a star on it and a sign which read, "Out of Chaos, Hope". Loving with agape love is what Paul tells us is God's radical way, the more excellent way.

The young man, Neil, lingered after the service. "Sometimes I think it's mostly for Agnes that they keep the church open. They asked me to play, of course," he said. "They had to ask, but grandpa knew I'd say no. I remember how he sighed with relief when I did. Then he slapped me on the back." (pause) "You're an organist?" Michael Lindvall asked. "Eastman School of Music class of 1984. I've had some big church jobs too, the last one...brand new organ, 102 ranks, 4 services a Sunday. But then I got sick. I've been HIV positive for 6 years. The personnel committee of that church figured it out and told me it would be best if I moved on, but not till after Christmas, of course. My parents live in St. Paul, but my father and I haven't spoken since I was 19. I really had nowhere to go. My grandfather Lloyd said I could move in with him and Agnes. To tell the truth, I feel right at home in a town of 80 yr olds." He paused and then went on, "The church keeps Agnes and they took me in. And since I moved up here, most every night Lloyd or old man Engstrom from down the road opens up the church for me. If it's cold, they lay a fire in the wood stove. And then I play the organ. It's a sweet little instrument, believe it or not. Lloyd's kept it up." "These last weeks it's been almost warm in the evenings, so they leave the doors and windows of the church open and everybody sits out on their front porch and they listen to me play (Bach, Buxtehude, Widor, all the stuff I love. And they clap from their porches. Even Agnes claps."

Friends, I've heard it said that "this radical new way has the power and eternity of God in it,"⁵ (*repeat*). This is because it is the real embodiment of Christ. It is the embodiment of the one who with agape love gave everything away, even his life. Living this way, we CAN as one bear all things, we CAN believe all things, we CAN hope all things, we CAN endure all things. Embodying Christ, we can show others the way. We have shown others the way, and, like the organ in the little church in Carthage Lake, MN, we can keep it up. It is a love that is the

⁵ John Buchanan. Sermon: "Love's Embodiment". <http://www.fourthchurch.org/sermons/2001/021101.html>. (accessed

foundation of the universe. It is a love that never ends. It is indeed the more excellent way.

Amen.

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