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1 Corinthians 13:1-13

Our epistle lesson sounds like its one for lovers. I have been asked to read it at least two weddings of friends of mine. You can understand why it's so popular for weddings. It seems to be so clear! Through it, God can certainly speak to couples who are marrying. Yet this is not what Paul was thinking about when he wrote this letter to the Corinthians.

For the past couple weeks, we have reflected on the passages immediately before this one. All along the way, Paul has been speaking to some of the problems that the church was having in Corinth. Two weeks ago, kids will remember that I had God's tool box here. We talked about the many different gifts that God gives us as a community, and how they are all from God. Last week, Paul reflected on how the church is unified with all the diversity of gifts. It was that fabulous passage on how the different members are interdependent in the body of Christ. "The eye can not say to the hand, 'I have no need of you...'" (*1 Cor. 12:21*)

At the end of chapter 12, Paul does not stop talking about the body of Christ. He doesn't radically change gears to the topic of love. His thought process fits nicely together. Paul ended last week's reading by talking about all the wonderful

gifts that the church has – apostles, prophets, teachers. Paul finished the chapter with, “But strive for the greater gifts. And I will show you a still more excellent way.” And then he leads us right into our reading today. “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 faith, so as to remove mountains, but I do not have love, I am nothing.” *(1 Cor. 12:31-13:2)*

There were a great diversity of gifts in the Corinthian church, but Paul wrote that the “more excellent way” is not to strive for a specific kind of gift. In fact, even the gifts are nothing without love. Paul’s more excellent way is what all members share in common: love, and specifically, the love of Christ.

Paul’s description of love fits perfectly with how he understands God’s love in Jesus Christ. In other New Testament writings, Paul focuses on Jesus as God’s gift of love.

Christ welcomes us, sinners, by offering himself as our humble servant *(Rom 5:8, 15:7-8)* He was not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. Servants could never be that way! He was not self-serving at all. He was patient, and bore all sorts of insults and abuse on behalf of the kingdom of God. *(Rom 15:3)* We hear such a story in our

gospel lesson today. Jesus was proclaiming the good news of God's promise to Israel. His own people, who knew him from his youngest years, wanted to throw him off a cliff. (*Luke 4:29*)

Despite all the resistance that Christ encountered. Despite the problems he had with the powers that be. Despite the sin of humanity. In his life, and teaching, and passion, Christ loves. Jesus "bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. [Jesus] never ends." (*1 Cor. 13:7-8*) In this whole passage about love, we could simply replace that word with the word Jesus or Christ – or the phrase, Christ's love. "[Jesus] is patient; [he] is kind... [Jesus does] not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth." (*1 Cor 13:4, 6*)

Jesus and his love were a glimpse of who God is. In him, we see what God's love for us is. We only get a glimpse though – as in a mirror dimly. Some day in the future, we will see and know God face to face, just as Moses did. For now, Jesus Christ is the best way that we can know God and God's love for us.

Now if Paul were just giving a lecture on Jesus, he could have done that. There are plenty of places like that, especially in his letter to the Romans.

But that's not what the Corinthian church needed to hear. You'll remember that they were having lots of problems. They had many divisions. They treated people differently based upon which kind of spiritual gifts that they had. They were

being selfish with the communion they shared. I suspect that Paul's list of things that love is NOT is partly a list of failings among the Corinthians. Paul tells them that love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way. Love is not irritable or resentful. It does not rejoice in wrongdoing. Don't they sound like normal people? We all have these moments, perhaps some of us more than others. Perhaps there are times when we are guilty of acting in NOT-loving ways more frequently. I find for myself that it is easier to be NOT-loving to the people who I am closest to – or to the people who I see most often. It's hard to try to love as Christ all the time. It can be exhausting. Sometimes a snarky comment escapes. Or we are certain that our way is best for all. We feel hurt or offended. We're all just a few steps from being irritable or resentful or rude.

What the Corinthians and we need to hear is about this love that we are to share with one another. Paul instructed in the art form of loving as Christ showed us. This is the greatest possible gift, given to us all. It is one of the gifts that we receive when we are knit into the body of Christ. Christ's Spirit of life strengthens us with the ability to love when we don't know how. God gives us one another for support and encouragement in that process. Or when we're not sure if we have the ability to be: patient in the face of frustration; forgiving in the face of sin; generous in the face of a needy world; advocates in the face of injustice. We will love

incompletely and imperfectly. Yet, God will end up loving more through us than seemed possible alone. And God will also heal us and help us forgive.

This multifaceted love is Christ's ministry to the world. And it is the ministry to which we are called as a people. It takes many different forms based on our different spiritual gifts. But it is Christ's love that forgives us for our imperfect attempts, Christ's Spirit who unites us as a body and who sends us out to be Christ's lovers of the world.

Go in peace... and love.