

Wesley United Methodist Church Rev. Beverly E Stenmark
February 3, 2019
Title: The Greatest of These is Love
Scripture: Jeremiah 1:4-10
1 Corinthians 13:1-13
Luke 4:21-30

Today's Epistle lesson from 1 Corinthians is familiar to many. When you heard it read a couple of minutes ago – what did you think about? Most people think about weddings when we hear this passage because that is where we frequently hear it read. It does contain some good advice for couples who are getting married, but it really has nothing to do with romantic love.

1 Corinthians was written by the Apostle Paul about 20-25 years after Jesus was crucified. (53-54AD.) Think for a minute of what it was like to be an early follower of Jesus in those years soon after his death. Initially most of his followers were Jews. In the Roman Empire, and the surrounding area, there were large numbers of Roman and Greek gods. Families and tribes often had their own household gods. Judaism, however, was unique for insisting that there was only one God.

For the Jewish people, it was a huge paradigm shift to think of Jesus as being the Son of God, as having the authority of God. Jesus had said and done many things in the three years of his active ministry that were confusing. In fact, in today's gospel, we find the people in the synagogue, who had known him as a child and knew his family, becoming very angry at what he said to them. They became angry enough that they tried to harm him by throwing him off a cliff.

It was hard to figure out who Jesus was and what it meant to follow him. Paul was a devout Jew, a Pharisee, who thought Jesus was such a threat to the status quo that he started tracking down followers of Jesus to have them killed. After a dramatic encounter on the road to Damascus, Paul became a passionate follower of Jesus and became one of the best-known missionaries. He traveled throughout his world teaching people about Jesus and establishing and encouraging new faith communities in several towns.

Paul spent about a year and a half in the city of Corinth. In the first century AD, Corinth was a major metropolitan city. It was a center for trade and tourism. By the time Paul left, there was an active and growing community of both Jews and Gentiles following Jesus, or what was called, "The Way". The believers in Corinth were a diverse group. Besides being both Jews and Gentiles, the community also included slaves and men who had been slaves but were now free, as well as members of the upper classes.

The people in the new church were trying to learn how to live together but, in some cases, they were more influenced by their culture than by what Jesus taught. Their differences became sources of conflict with each other, and these grew into divisions.

Over the last couple of weeks, we've heard words from the letter that Paul wrote to them in response to their conflicts and divisions. He talked about the many gifts that people had been given by the Holy Spirit and how all of the gifts were needed.

At the end of his elaborate instruction about being like one body, despite having just claimed that they were all equal, he told them to strive for the greater gifts. That would have gotten their attention, because that's

what they wanted; they wanted to have the greatest gift; they still wanted to be greater, more important, than anyone else.

But in a curve ball, he teaches them about the more excellent way, the greatest gift – the gift of love. They lived in a “stratified, competitive, changing society, characterized by unequal distribution of power and access to resources. Paul argues that the new covenant through Christ must transform the power dynamics among them through love and interdependence within the global body of Christ.”ⁱ

Jesus’ coming into the world transformed the nature of human relations with God and with each other. These changes were huge. We, too, live in a world that is changing rapidly, and this passage speaks to us also about how to live as faithful followers of Jesus within our changing world. Paul urges the Corinthians, and us, to the highest calling – love.

They are to respond to God’s love, and they are to love each other in the midst of their differences. This love is not necessarily an emotional feeling, rather it is an intentional way of living together. It is probably the only real way to overcome factions and divisions within the community without there being winners and losers. It is a way of respecting all the members of the community and ending discrimination based on social class or any other human distinction.

Still, it’s more than just a way to end divisions, or to appear to live together in peace, it’s not pretending to love. It is all about seeking to build each other up, to take care of each other. It is a way of living in such a way that outsiders will be able to see Christ’s life and love through them.

There are several different words in Greek for love and the one used here is agape. It is love that is selfless, whole, and builds up the whole believing community. Agape is nothing less than the unmerited,

compassionate, enduring love of God. “God’s love toward humankind is patient, kind, self-giving, generous, encouraging, and truthful; the faith community is called to exhibit this same love to the best of their ability, since it is an excellent way.”ⁱⁱ

One of the important things to see here is that this kind of love is inherently humble and open to honest self-evaluation. It is deeply aware of the inevitable limitations of our insight into the action and the grace of God. It is an awareness that we don’t have, and cannot have, all the answers because we “know only in part”.

When we are honest, we know this is true in personal relationships where we cannot know with absolute certainty what someone else’s motives are. As I said, it is good advice to people getting married, or in any kind of relationship.

But it is even more true when it comes to questions of faith and differences of opinion. We may be sure in our own mind what we believe the Bible says, what we believe Jesus taught, and what Jesus wants us to do, but the reality is that we do not speak for God.

We speak out of our faith, but it is important for us to acknowledge that we do not have all the answers. Someone with whom we disagree may have the same certainty that we have and just like us, his or her understanding may also be based on his or her faith and study of the Bible.

John Wesley followed a time-honored dictum that fits with this understanding. “In Essentials unity. In non-essentials liberty. In all things charity.” There are some things upon which we need to be united and need to agree if we are to call ourselves Christians. But there are many things that are not-essential – for instance our style of worship, or way of organizing as a church, and others. In these things we should have the

liberty to believe in ways that are different than others. But in all things, we should treat each other with charity, with love, with kindness, with patience, just as God treats and loves us.

In three weeks, 864 delegates from around the world will gather for a special session of General Conference to receive and act upon the report from the Commission on the Way Forward. They will listen to speeches and more than likely try to convince each other to see things their way. This week, Bishop Devadhar wrote about this very important session. Looking ahead, he wrote, “On Feb. 27, perhaps the questions we should be asking are not those coming from pride, fear, or judgment but rather about whether we have been faithful to God through our mission to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world. Have our decisions enabled or inspired others to become disciples of Jesus Christ? Have we listened to the voice of the Holy Spirit? Have we demonstrated our discipleship through our actions and how we treated one another in the midst of our Christian conferencing?”ⁱⁱⁱ

Essentially, Bishop Devadhar is praying and urging delegates to General Conference to act in the way that Paul urges in 1 Corinthians 13. Act in a more excellent way – the way of Love that is patient, kind, seeking the best for all.

It is not always easy to live this way, and it got Jesus into trouble more than once. In today’s gospel, things started out smoothly enough in the synagogue. Jesus was in his home town, and initially people spoke well of him. “Isn’t this Joseph’s son?” The local boy achieving fame and popularity. More than likely they thought that Jesus would do some truly outstanding miracle in their presence. They likely thought that they would

share in his fame and that their hometown reputation would change for the better because of him.

But then Jesus reminded them of Elijah and Elisha, two of Israel's ancient prophets who had taken God's blessing to non-Jews. Their religious identity was based on the belief that they were God's special people and that Jesus would bless the hometown folks in greater abundance than others.

Nazareth was surrounded by Gentile neighbors. The Jews were struggling hard to maintain their identity in a region occupied by Rome. Here Jesus was claiming that God would bless **all** the poor, **all** the captives, **all** the blind, **all** the oppressed – Gentiles as well as Jews. Other prophets – Elijah and Elisha – had said the same thing. “This indictment from their own Scripture was simply too much for Nazareth. Jesus was saying that God's blessing would not fall on them alone or even on all Israel but also on Gentiles.”^{iv}

God's love is radically inclusive. God's love does not exclude people based on any human distinction. God's love reaches out to all people and Jesus stirred up the anger of the people of Nazareth by telling them this. They were an oppressed people. They could not be blamed for thinking, hoping, believing that God would set them free and that this made them special. Thankfully for us, the Gentiles, God's love did not end with the Jews but reached out to all of us.

For the Corinthians living only 20-25 years after Jesus' death, Paul taught them once again about this inclusive love – and about how they were to model this same love in their community and beyond. That same message comes to us today.

We are not to be confined by our own agenda, by what is important to us, but rather by what is most important to God. Like the people of Corinth, we are reminded that we know only in part, and that we, who are loved by God with a love that never ends, are to share that same love with others. We are to model this love, understanding, patience not only with those we are close to, those we like, but also those with whom we disagree, those whom we find it hard to like.

“We all struggle to understand how to live together in community, how to live in our cities and nations as faithful disciples, and how to relate as Christians to global realities. Paul’s vision of the church as family, an organism that survives, grows or dies together provides a window into understanding the life of the church today.”^v

It is still our model for how to live and to be in relationship with each other today.

ⁱ Poetker, Katrina “Letters from the Ancient World” in Preaching the Word, Sojourners

ⁱⁱ Wingeier, Douglas E. editor. Keeping Holy Time, Year C. p.78

ⁱⁱⁱ Devadhar, Bishop Sudarshana. Together in Christ. Feb. 1, 2019

^{iv} Wingeier, p. 80

^v Poetker,