

Sermon for Sunday, June 9, 2024

1 Corinthians 13 and Luke 11:9-13

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable to you Oh Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

I'm going to begin by bursting your bubble this morning. It is very common for this passage to be read at weddings because of the strength of the words that Paul uses to describe the characteristics of love. But here's the thing: Paul didn't write these words to describe a loving marriage. Paul wrote these words to serve as a corrective for the members of the Corinthian congregation who, it seems, were in constant competition with one another over the question of who was the best Christian/the most spiritual/ the best follower of Jesus. As a result they were undermining the faith of many of their fellow believers. Apparently they were constantly asking questions like: Who has the best spiritual gift of speaking in tongues? Who has the strongest gift of prophesy? Who has the deepest knowledge and best understanding of mysterious things? Who has the strongest faith? Who has sacrificed the most by giving away the most possessions? The competition was intense and few came out of the debate encouraged or strengthened in their faith in God and Jesus.

With faith let us seek understanding so that we are ultimately built up and encouraged. When we dig deeper into this reading we can see that it can be divided into three sections.

In the opening verses Paul highlights the seemingly important spiritual gifts that I just mentioned. But he always contrasts them with love. He insists that none of these gifts are as important as love. Our best guess is that he has been made aware of the inappropriate boasting occurring in the gathering of the faithful and chides them by explaining that if they are not acting out of love and concern for the feelings of the people around them then their gifts are meaningless.

The second section begins with verse 4 and in it Paul describes the characteristics of love. These descriptors are the "antithesis" of the Corinthians' behavior. In other words, they are acting in exactly the opposite manner. Paul is calling them to account and urging them into unity with each other. We can grasp his intent if we consider how divisive it is for them to be in competition with one another. How divisive it is for them to be comparing their spiritual gifts to those of others; with the subsequent human tendency to

want to be better than someone or to grow their gift—not for the benefit of others—but for the status.

But here's the amazing thing: God loved them and loves us, anyway!

As Paul describes it in the third section

- We know only in part—our understanding is incomplete
- We speak, think, and reason like a child we are not yet mature
- We see in a mirror dimly

And God loves us anyway! In spite of our multitude of mis-steps, our misunderstandings, our misuse of Scripture; in spite of all of our miscommunications and mistakes, God loves us anyway!

As Paul closes this chapter he asserts that faith, hope and love are the enduring character traits of the Christian life. One of my commentaries says it this way, "In the present time, in this anomalous interval between the cross and the return of the king. Faith is the trust that we direct toward the God of Israel, who has kept faith with his covenant promises by putting forward Jesus for our sake and raising him to new life; hope focuses our fervent desire to see a broken world restored by God to its rightful wholeness and love is the foretaste of our ultimate union with God...."

So what is Paul trying to accomplish in this passage? How are we to think about it? Paul is talking about life: plain and simple life. He is trying to teach what is sometimes called *ethics*. That means he's trying to teach the reader how to love. He is seeking to promote the formation of Christian character in the community.

Imagine what it would be like if we, as a faith community, committed to caring for one another with love. Imagine what it would be like if we disciplined ourselves into patterns of behavior that demonstrate love, true love for one another, the type of love that Paul describes: the patient and kind type of love. The love that is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude or irritable or resentful. The love that does not involve the ego; thereby insisting on its own way. The love that rejoices in truth, that bears, believes, hopes, and endures all things.

Imagine what would happen if we developed such a strong habit of love that we don't even have to think about whether or not we are exhibiting this behavior....it just happens. And imagine how our actions would resonate in the larger world.

Paul's deep love and concern for his Corinthian congregation comes with a realization that it was going to be really hard for them to live as transformed people of God. They hadn't been raised that way; they didn't have good habits to fall back upon. In effect they were going to have to re-program themselves. And that was going to be hard. They were going to have to think about most every action they took each day.

We cannot imagine some of these difficulties because we have been raised as Christians. However, we also know that we fail. We mess up every day and in every way. And when we can't decide what to do, the word that should guide us is "love." We have been given the gift of the Holy Spirit. As a result we have also been given the gift of love and the ability to love one another.

We are called to be counter-cultural examples of love in the world. Not an easy task, but with God's help it is possible. Jesus taught in Luke 11:9-13 9 "So I say to you, Ask, and it will be given you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you. 10 For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened. 11 Is there anyone among you who, if your child asks for a fish, will give a snake instead of a fish? 12 Or if the child asks for an egg, will give a scorpion? 13 If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!"

Ask my friends to be given the ability to demonstrate love to the people around you. Trust that when you do so, your heavenly Father will grant it to you. Seek the opportunity to demonstrate love and you will discover plenty of needs. Knock on the door of kindness and love and it will open to you and grant you more than you can even imagine. Amen.