

The Greatest of These

October 18, 2020

Bendersville & Wenksville United Methodist Churches

1 Corinthians 13:1-13

So, this passage of scripture has been on my mind a lot this week. It's probably the #1 most beloved wedding scripture – and in fact, I used it in a wedding just this week. It's a poignant reminder to a young couple in love of what love is all about. Not just love in the beautiful times when patience and kindness come so naturally, but also what love looks like after the honeymoon, during those seasons of life in which love becomes a conscious choice that we have to make, over and over again.

We read this passage at weddings, but sometimes I think we do it a huge injustice when we relegate 1 Corinthians 13 *only* to weddings. When we apply its words to a young newlywed couple, but neglect to talk about how it actually applies to *all* of us, all the time, whether we are married or have ever been married or not.

And in fact, I'd say that in the world we live in today, Paul's message to the first century Corinthians still rings as true for us now as it ever has.

So here's what's going on when Paul is writing. (Hehehe...a month or so ago it seemed like all I ever talked about was the history of the Babylonian Exile...and now we seem to be hanging out for a long time in New Testament letters. I promise – it's not my intent to plant us down in one Biblical genre for weeks and weeks at a time; it's just where it seems like the Holy Spirit is leading).

So...Corinthians. Two weeks ago we read a letter – Philemon – that was written by Paul to one single person, one individual. Last week we read a letter – Jude – that was not written by Paul, and that was written to a large group of churches – any church that may happen to come upon it and read it.

Today we are stepping back into Paul again, and exploring one of his more classic letters. 1 Corinthians was written to one specific church – the church in Corinth. And this church is experiencing some challenges. To put it mildly. The church is a hot mess. As we read 1 Corinthians, we see Paul naming one problem after another, after another, after another. And at the root of the problems are the massive divisions and factions that have cropped up among the Corinthians. Evidently, the church in Corinth has sort-of divided itself up into different camps, based on the church leaders that they most admire and wish to follow. These might be the earliest roots of political parties. Or maybe church denominations. In chapter 1 Paul says "it has been reported to me that there are quarrels among you. What I mean is that each of you says, "I belong to Paul," or "I belong to Apollos," or "I belong to Cephas," or "I belong to Christ."

“I belong to the United Methodist Church. I belong to the Lutheran Church. I belong to the Catholic Church. I belong to the Mennonite church.”

“I belong to the Democratic Party. I belong to the Republican Party. I am a Libertarian. I am an Independent.”

“Has Christ been divided?” He then goes on to say “I thank God that I baptized none of you!” Well...maybe I baptized a couple of you. But that’s not the point! Here’s the point: These leaders that you are rallying behind and aligning yourselves behind and dividing yourselves on the basis of, these leaders are great people, but they’re not God. They didn’t die for your sins. You’ve taken your focus off of the cross of Christ and decided instead to focus on petty things. Teeny, tiny little petty differences that really don’t mean that much in the grand scheme of things, but you’ve blown these differences of opinion out of proportion and made them the absolute biggest things in the world and then decided that you can’t live with each other or eat together at the same table or worship together or think of anything nice to say about one another. And instead you’ve reverted to namecalling, and demonizing one another, and pitting yourselves against one another and refusing to work together on anything.

Sound at all familiar, friends?

Paul draws the comparison between the Corinthian church and a person who keeps trying to cut off his own limbs. “The differences among you are *good*,” Paul is trying to say to them. You *need* differences to see the whole picture. Just like a hand, and a foot, and an eye, and an ear do not all serve the same function, and the body would be incomplete without all of them, we as people, as beloved parts of the body of Christ, do not all have to look alike or believe alike or think alike or vote alike to serve the purpose that God has created us for. And in fact, without *all* of our differing perspectives we only see the tiniest little glimpse of the picture.

It’s like the Indian folk tale of the blind men and the elephant:

Long ago six old men lived in a village in India. Each was born blind. The other villagers loved the old men and kept them away from harm. Since the blind men could not see the world for themselves, they had to imagine many of its wonders. They listened carefully to the stories told by travelers to learn what they could about life outside the village.

The men were curious about many of the stories they heard, but they were most curious about elephants. They were told that elephants could trample forests, carry huge burdens, and frighten young and old with their loud trumpet calls. But they also knew that the princess rode an elephant when she traveled in her father's kingdom. Why would the king let his daughter get near such a dangerous creature?

It so happened one morning that an elephant was led down the road where they stood. When they were told that the great beast was before them, they asked the driver to let him stop so that they might see him.

Of course they could not see him with their eyes; but they thought that by touching him they could learn just what kind of animal he was. Was he strong? Frightening? Magical? Or gentle? Was he dangerous, or was he kind? Now they would know, once and for all.

The first one put his hand on the elephant's side. "Well, well!" he said, "now I know all about this beast. He smooth and solid, like a wall."

The second felt the elephant's tusk. "My brother," he said, "you are mistaken. He is not at all like a wall. This creature is as sharp and deadly as a spear."

The third took hold of the elephant's trunk, and then recoiled. "Both of you are wrong," he said, still shaking. "Anybody who knows anything can see that this elephant is like a giant snake."

The fourth reached out his arms, and grasped one of the elephant's legs. "Oh, how blind you are!" he said. "It is very plain to me that he is round and tall like a strong and sturdy tree."

The fifth was a very tall man, and he chanced to take hold of the elephant's ear. "This beast is not like any of the things that you name," he said. "He is like a huge fan. Or maybe, like a magic carpet that can fly over mountains and treetops. "

The sixth was the blindest of them all, and it was some time before he could even find the elephant. At last he seized the animal's tail. "O foolish fellows!" he cried. "Every one of you has lost your senses. This elephant is not like a wall, or a spear, or a snake, or a tree; or a carpet. Any man with a particle of sense can see that this is nothing more than a piece of old rope! Dangerous, indeed, he scoffed. Someone is playing a trick on us."

Then the elephant moved on, and the six blind men sat by the roadside all day, and argued about him. Each believed that he knew just how the animal looked; and each called the others hard names because they did not agree with him.

Blind men like these are who 1 Corinthians 13 is written for. 21st Century American Christians are who it was written for. Not for two people who are in love and passionately committing their lives to each other. It's written to a group of people who have grown to hate one another; who can't get along; who try to cut one another off and cut each other out and dismiss and disregard one another and who try to play these stupid political games with one another and can't see eye-to-eye on much of *anything*. It's written to a community of people who are crumbling – who are in chaos and turmoil

and they're all feeling self-righteous about their stances and they simply cannot place themselves in the shoes of anybody who thinks differently than they do.

And it's to *this* group of people that we hear these words:

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.

Essentially, it doesn't matter how gifted we are or how "right" we are or how eloquent we are or how beautiful we are or how influential we are or how successful we are. If we are all these things, but we don't know how to love, it's all for nothing. Because love is where it begins. Everything – *everything* – is built upon love.

And here is what love is:

Love is patient.

Love is kind.

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, but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

Love. Never. Ends.

So first: Stop the fighting, Paul says, and start again – but this time, start from a place of love. Even if you are right – that's not an excuse to lord it over one another. Let love guide every conversation that you have.

And second: Stop assuming that you – and you alone – are right. Because right now, all you can see is an elephant's tail. And you are holding on to that tail for all it's worth. But one day, you will see the whole elephant.

"Right now, you are living life like a child," Paul tells them. "You don't see the big picture. But when you grow up, you will have a whole new perspective."

"Right now, we see in a mirror dimly. But then, we will see face to face."

"Now I know only in part; then I will know fully."

What you think you know right now, that is going to change, when all is said and done.

So rather than hanging on tightly to the things that divide you, hold on instead to the things that will never change, the things that will abide forever, the things that will exist long after these squabbles and these fights, this election season, this pandemic, this year of uncertainty and unrest are over.

Faith, hope, and love. *That's* what we should cling to. That is what will endure. And most especially, the greatest of these. Love. Because it is only in making the conscious choice to love when it is hardest to do so, that we will begin to see the fullness of God through the eyes of one another.