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Emory Presbyterian Church
I Corinthians 13:1-13
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“A Still More Excellent Way”

I cannot *count* number of times I've preached this text at weddings. (Any more than you could probably *count* the number of times you've heard it *preached* at weddings. And a year from now, at Lauren's wedding (ooh, I'm so excited about that!) you'll probably hear it again because, like many brides, Lauren favors that text, too.

Cited more often than any other scripture as a favorite biblical text, the thirteenth chapter of First Corinthians is probably the best known, most popular, most used, and, I would suggest, most abused, text of all of Paul's writings.

Of course, there's good reason for its immense popularity and appeal: I Corinthians 13 is a beautifully crafted and poetic polemic, an exalted hymn, on the topic of that favored of all feelings...love. And as such, the thirteenth chapter of I Corinthians is routinely lifted out of its context by persons, churched and unchurched alike, for those occasions when love, particularly romantic love is celebrated.

To be sure, Paul's lyrical words about the nature of love carry an almost universal appeal, which, like the best of any poetry, does not diminish with repetition. At the same time, though, like an old familiar tune whose words no longer register any meaning, our very familiarity with this popular Pauline text can actually numb our ears to its message. Especially when we lift it out of its context for an application which, I can assure you, the Apostle did not intend.

For, contrary to popular belief, Paul did not write these compelling verses for the purpose of pontificating on the general theme of ideal love, especially not romantic love.

(You may know about the Apostle that he was no Don Juan. Given the imminent End Times in Paul's world view, he was only marginally tolerant of marriage, and only then for prophylactic purposes. You know – if you couldn't tolerate the "burning.")

So we can be sure that with this text, Paul was most definitely *not* aiming to establish any sentimental certitudes about the nature of love, conjugal or otherwise. Rather, what Paul had in mind was speaking to some very troubling concerns he was carrying about the new church development in Corinth, Greece.

You recall from last week's sermon that the church in Corinth was a young church, a New Church Development, which Paul himself had only recently founded. But word was that the community was falling apart at the seams.

And what could be causing such fractious division? Well, you know, people felt differently about things. And as time went on, their differences grew stronger and more cemented until walls were being built. And they couldn't talk over those walls. Worse, they were starting not to want to.

Although Paul had himself instructed the fledgling community of faith at Corinth, seems like people had walked away with different understandings of what he'd said. (Given the volumes of Paul's rhetoric, this is understandable.) The folks in Corinth had a pretty good idea about who Christ was, and all, and how the Spirit was supposed to work, but they still got mixed up. The concepts seemed slippery. God was Jesus, Jesus was God, Jesus died, then lived again which is somehow meant to translate into eternal life for everybody who believes in him. But then again, just what *is* eternal life, anyway?

Truth is, nobody *really* had a handle on it, just as nobody ever really has. But some acted like they did, and lorded it over others as if they had some kind of corner on the truth. And when they started putting down those who didn't share their particular take, people

stopped speaking to each other. Some left the church. Those who remained felt bruised and confused. They'd been pretty sure they were on to something special with the Gospel; what had gone wrong? How come everybody was feeling so angry and alienated from each other?

One of the most heated controversies, as we talked about last week, had to do with the relative value of spiritual gifts. Evidently those who spoke in tongues thought they had it all over those who merely interpreted, while those who prophesied or taught scripture or healed the sick, thought his or her gift were the more important. And said so.

Gatherings of the church felt stiff, tense, as if there were some poisonous snake in the room nobody wanted to acknowledge. Arguments erupted over who were the better Christian, whose understanding more faithful, whose gift of the Spirit, more precious. Little factions formed and fed on fetid exclusivity. Clearly, it was not a time of love in the church, romantic or otherwise.

Now, the particular controversy over whose spiritual gift were more important may strike us today as a tad goofy. I mean, if a Presbyterian accidentally slipped into glossolalia, speaking in tongues, she'd probably be too embarrassed even to *tell* anyone, never mind brag about it. So to help the story make more sense to us, let's substitute some polarizing categories of our own, like those who were or are "for" or "against" Beverly, or "for" or "against" Barack Obama, or "for" or "against" Presbytery, or "for" or "against" the ordination of gays and lesbians. Substitute positions related to any of our strong preferences, thoughtful judgments, or personal values about which we're pretty sure we're right, and you'll get a clearer picture of what was behind the destructive forces at work in the Corinthian community.

Embroided as it was in its divisive controversies, at least that early church had the

good sense to ask for help. In the absence of a Presbytery, Committee on Ministry, Conflict Resolution team or Administrative Commission, what they decide to do is write Paul and ask *his* counsel. (Wouldn't it be cool to be able to do that?) And Paul writes back. Twice. Today's text, as I mentioned, is from his first reply back to the Corinthians.

Paul opens his first letter by thanking God for the Corinthian community and praying God's blessing on them. Then he asks them to quit quarreling because their differences are distracting them from the power of Christ and the wisdom of God. Says he did his best to teach them the mystery of faith with simple words and examples (with milk, not solid food) because he knew they were "infants in Christ." So get over yourselves, he says. "All this fussing about the wisdom of the world only indicates that you're *still* infants."

Only, Paul doesn't really want to shame the Corinthians, just get them to see reason. So he reasons his rhetorical way through their various postures on sexual immorality, marriage, care of the poor, relations with idols, what women should wear on their heads, in what manner in which the Lord's Supper should be offered and received, and so forth, carefully and thoroughly addressing each particular controversy of the church as only a former Pharisee can do.

But by the time Paul gets to the thirteenth chapter of his letter (remember, this is *way* before e-mail), after he's carefully laid out and argued the logic of his position on every single matter before the church, the tone of his communiqué seems to shift. As though it's suddenly occurred to him that he's really not getting anywhere. That the problem in the Corinthian church doesn't really have to do with competing understandings of the gospel, or rival spiritual gifts, or alternative understandings of polity, or any of the other issues they were fussing about. No, the tone, the intolerance, the unkind behavior of members of the Corinthian church toward one another revealed something else – a kind of relational

disconnect born of a loveless spirituality that was far more serious than any mere disagreement about doctrine. So like a wise parent who knows the futility of a power struggle with a toddler, Paul shifts his approach altogether.

"Friends," he says, "speaking in tongues, interpreting tongues, healing by the Spirit, these are all quite important, but let me tell you what's *really* important. Allow me to elaborate on 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." Empty, ugly noise. A mere distraction. "If I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge," if I have the mystical insight of Marianne Williamson, Rumi and Thomas Keating, but do not have love, I *am* nothing. "If I have faith, so as to move mountains," if I'm a charter member of the church, an ordained elder who tithes, prays and directs the choir, but do not have love, I *have* nothing.

Or, to state it in the positive, only that which we do or say or offer with love has any meaning or enduring value.

God is love, and those who abide in love, abide in God, and God abides in them.

But what does Paul mean by "love?" The abstract, optimistic surrender of fuzzy-edged photographs rimmed with overweight cherubs? The pious, predictable affectation we reserve for times and places of worship? Some annoying imperative of being perpetually pleasant? I don't think so. I'm inclined to think when Paul talks about love, especially in the context of community, he's referring rather to an active, challenging, transforming force that asserts itself over against whatever is destructive, or demeaning or diminishing. A love that tolerates differences, disappointments and limitations, and explores a way through them. That somehow remains hopeful, peaceful, larger than the conflict at hand, open to possibilities beyond a given moment. That makes room for honesty, weakness and

vulnerability; that is less interested in punishing than seeking to understand, and that is able somehow to duke out the truth without falling apart at the seams.

Anybody besides me feel convicted yet?

This love Paul is talking about is tough stuff, even scary stuff, because, by rearranging what has meaning and value and what does not, it radically challenges the rules by which you and I generally operate. What I hear Paul saying is that nothing we accomplish in and of themselves has any real meaning or enduring value except to whatever extent they express the love we bear God, ourselves and one another. However important our gifts, our goals, lists, our achievements, programs, or traditions, *love is still the more excellent way*.

As one who is too often consumed by righteous anger, this is a very tough truth to swallow. Outrage is a formidable ally in any argumentation. And if Paul's kind of love is tough for an individual to incorporate, imagine how tricky it is in a community, in which the dynamic of conflict and division is even harder to frame. Witness the controversies that have divided this church in recent years, or our denomination, or – shoot, witness the tone of the current partisan health care debate.

No doubt Paul would nod knowingly at the comments of former moderator Douglas Oldenburg's appeal to the 211th General Assembly when he urged our denomination to "move beyond the 'we/they,' 'winner/loser' mentality, to soften up a bit, to hold our convictions with humility, and to avoid the incivility and stridency that seems to be growing in our country and in our church. Listen carefully and respectfully to one another, he says, especially to those who may disagree with you, to discern together the mind of Christ, but always in the spirit of Christ, ...and make every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the

bond of peace.”¹

Now that’s love. I see it, believe it, honor it, but sure can’t always *do* it. With all the passions, opinions, fears and brokenness that drive us ordinary human beings, how on earth how are we ever supposed to love the way Paul wants us to? If we don’t happen personally to be a long-winded, unmarried, childless, humorless, first century apostolic authority, how are we supposed to draw nearer to the kind of love God calls us to exercise? For that matter, how did Paul do it?

Well, first, he didn’t. At least not all the time. His epistles are full of pissing and moaning about his standing in the church and the errors of faulty disciples. Still, I’m convinced that Paul knew, maybe better than anybody, both how followers of Jesus Christ are called to be, *and* how very difficult it is. If we know only in part, and prophesy only in part, certainly we also love only in part. When the complete comes, when God’s peace reigns on earth in the final and full coming of Jesus Christ, only then will the partial come to an end.

Meanwhile, in case we wonder, in the midst of our complex lives of competing demands, on what we should be focusing our time and effort, our attention and prayer - it might be knowledge, it might be experience, it might be advancement, endurance, or growth; it might faith, or hope, or love. But from Paul’s point of view, there is little question: “the greatest of these is love.” To the glory of God. Amen.

¹Oldenburg, Douglas. “Together in God’s Grace,” Unity in the Midst of Diversity, Office of the General Assembly, 1999. p 6.