

Lectionary 4 C 2022

Dove of Peace Lutheran Church

Pastor Stephen Springer

January 30, 2022

1 Corinthians 13:1-13

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Dear Friends:

“Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude.” Our second reading today is often read at weddings. Because it’s about love. I’m always amused by that. Because this second reading is from Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians. And just six chapters earlier, in that same letter, Paul was advising people to avoid marriage as an unnecessary entanglement!

So in this later chapter, where he is commending love, he is certainly not speaking of the kind of love that we call romantic. He’s not talking about husbands or wives. He’s talking about *agape*— a word so different from romantic love that for most of Christian history this word was translated as *charity*. In the King James Version of 1604, it says, *“Charity suffereth long, and is kind; charity envieth not; charity vaunteth not itself.”* Charity originally meant any kind of selfless, benevolent action that Christians might do. But its meaning has now narrowed down to generosity toward the poor and toward those unable to do things for themselves. That kind of charity is not what Paul is talking about. But then neither is romantic love, which is why translators so often opted for the word “charity.”

“And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing.” Paul is writing to a congregation that seems to be in conflict, that seems to be dysfunctional. What has come down to us are two letters of Paul, as well as a later letter by Clement, which was not included in the New Testament. As with most of Paul’s letters, we only have his side of the issues. We have to deduce what we can about the Corinthian Christians, or the Galatians, or the Thessalonians. But we can deduce that there were a lot of egos in the church that he was writing to. A lot of narcissism. People just being ugly to one another, and rude and arrogant. And: Religious things and religious which the letter calls *spir* those things are being swept up into the egos and the factions.

If there is one book of the Bible that speaks to our culture and to this moment in history, I think it’s First Corinthians. The Corinthian community is experiencing social disintegration. And a kind of runaway individualism which in some ways is very modern and very familiar to us. First Corinthians is the letter in which Paul launches the idea that the church is the body of Christ. And we are all parts of that body. A body part is called a “member.” If you are a member of a book club, or a member of a professional organization, or a member of Congress, or a member of a fo the use of the word *member* in every case all traces back to First Corinthi Back to Paul. It’s his

metaphor. Many members, each with their own part to play, but one body. Paul is urging unity, he's urging community. Out of all these selves, these egos, Paul is trying to draw them back together. His use of the body metaphor was so successful that it is ubiquitous in our language, even though few people read or understand the Bible anymore.

I'd like to write a book about First Corinthians. A contemporary commentary on Paul's famous letter. It's called "Gong of Myself." Those of you who love American literature know Walt Whitman and Leaves of Grass and his great American poem, "Song of Myself." But some people have been singing about themselves for so long that the music is becoming noise. *If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a c* A noisy gong. If I can preach like Billy Graham, if I can sing like Plácido Domingo, if I can cure cancer, if I can score every time I have the ball, if I can do all those things, but I don't have love, then I am a noisy gong. Or a clanging cymbal. "Gong of Myself." Whatever it is that is good about me, whatever it is that is good about you, whatever gifts or talents we have, those things need to be used in harmony with the big picture. For the good of the many. For the well-being of others. For the sake of the mission.

Now Paul has several ways that he tries to rally the Corinthians to community. He starts with an important argument about Jesus Christ, an argument that we would call the theology of the cross. *God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, things that are not, to reduce to nothing things that are, so that no one might boast in the presence of* So Paul starts with the crucifixion of Jesus, not as a means of salvation, but as an indication of how God's power works in the world. Through patience, through a love that is unconditional and willing to suffer.

Paul turns to rationality when he talks about the body. Can the human eye survive without the human foot? Can the mouth operate without a throat? You can't go it alone, Paul says. We are interdependent, Paul says. You are not an entire body. You are a member of a body.

Finally, he comes to this great passage about love, *agape*, charity. Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. It *bears* and endures and doesn't give up. It *believes* in the things that cannot be seen or proven. It *hopes* in the promises of a good God, it *hopes* that our efforts are not in vain. It bears, believes, hopes, and endures. Paul is not talking about marriage, and he's not even talking about friendship. He's talking about community. He's talking about how a Christian ought to respond to egos run amok. Systemic narcissism. Individualism on steroids. The constant gonging and clanging. In which my ego wants to respond by gonging even louder than the others. But Paul advises me to *not* gong and clang. He advises you to *not* gong and clang. He advises love.

There is a moment in this scripture reading that Paul talks about looking a mirror. Mirrors in those days were like dinner plates made of bronze. Joy dishwashing liquid used to advertise that it got your plates so clean you could see yourself. Mirrors, in the time of the New Testament,

were not perfect reflections. You couldn't see yourself very well. Paul's words were translated in the King James Version as "through a glass darkly." He says right now we can't see everything very clearly. A day is coming. But right now, we can't see perfectly. We can't see ourselves perfectly. We can't see others perfectly. So what do we do? *And now*, Paul says, *And now*. While we lack perfect vision, in the here and now: faith, hope, and love abide and the greatest of these is love. Paul said to strive for the greater gifts. Faith, hope, and love. And the greatest, love, is the one that especially makes the difference. Amen.