

"THE MORE EXCELLENT WAY"

I Corinthians 13

Sermon preached by Dr. Cahill

Babcock Presbyterian Church

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The "Love Chapter" is Paul's spot on definition of love. "Love is patient and kind, not arrogant or rude. Love never insists on its own way. Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never ends."

The couples I marry usually request this reading from Paul's letter to the Corinthians. When I preach on this text I try to impress on the bride and groom and their guests that love is a gift from God that guarantees a long and successful marriage by inviting God into their relationship with each other. Being servants to one another, putting the other first, being attentive to the other's needs, never putting the other down, but always lifting the other up, these are all hallmarks of life-long partnerships that can survive and thrive even through the worst of times.

But although Paul's Christian definition of love is tailor made for newlyweds, Paul wasn't especially thinking of young couples tying the knot when he wrote these words two thousand years ago. Instead he was writing to a small, young congregation experiencing growing pains and conflict as these first generation Christians broke new ground being the Church of Jesus Christ.

Think of the challenge these new, young Christians faced. Most of them were Gentiles, products of the Greek-Roman culture. Until Paul came to Corinth, which was the Las Vegas of their day, they never heard of Jesus Christ, and had only a vague perception of the Jewish faith. Instead they were full-throttled pagans who valued sophistication, pleasure and wealth as the primary goals of life. But then, out of nowhere, this itinerant preacher named Paul came to town, preaching the Good News of Jesus Christ, who came into the world to save mankind from sin.

Accepting Christ as their savior was the easy part. Now came the challenge: accepting Christ as Lord, or in our modern terminology, our ultimate boss, and then following through by being faithful servants, putting flesh on the gospel by living the full abundant life, especially after Paul, their mentor, left Corinth to start new churches in other cities. Understandably, without Paul's guidance and authority these new Christians gradually lost focus as their old pagan ways started seeping back into their attitudes and behaviors. They needed correction, fast. So Paul, hearing about their struggles and conflicts wrote them a series of letters, encouraging and admonishing them to get back on track by putting Christ and his gospel back into the center of their life together.

It's at the heart of his first letter we find this beautiful hymn of love that has spoken to Christians of every generation up to the present time. "If I speak in the tongues of men and angels but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal." In other words you might be the most brilliant man or woman on the planet, you may have received the highest honors the world can give, you may be sophisticated, eloquent and highly intelligent, but if you lack the ability to receive and give love, if your heart doesn't ache or your conscience doesn't move you to action when a

neighbor is hurting, if you fail to do unto others as you would have them do unto you, you're a nothing, a big fat zero, because you lived only for yourself, when you could have lived for a higher purpose, loving God, your neighbor and yourself.

At the same time you might be the pillar of the Church, extremely knowledgeable about the Bible, being able to site verses of scripture and even recite from memory long passages. You may even have an orthodox faith and are effectively able to quote scriptures to defend your beliefs and your long held interpretations of scripture, but as Paul wrote, even if you speak in the tongues of men and angels, but lack love, you're just a bunch of silly noise.

Paul wants us to realize that being Christian means being Christ-like and being Christ-like means being like Jesus

who though he was in the form of God
did not regard equality with God
as something to be exploited
but emptied himself, taking the form
of a slave...

Paul introduced his love chapter with the words "I will show you a still more excellent way." That more excellent way is the way of Jesus and as Christians we are called to find our own way as we follow Jesus in discipleship and service.

Question: what does the "more excellent way" look like? Certainly it means being compassionate, but also even daring to buck the system when you perceive it being dehumanizing. It may also mean standing alone, like Martin Luther some five hundred years ago, standing up against the authority of the Pope by advocating "a more excellent way" of being the Church.

Let's be honest with each other. It's easy to hear all this "good stuff" in the Bible when speaking generalities. In theory, it sounds reasonable, but when you bring up specifics and begin to apply "the more excellent way" to correct your own time-honored beliefs and practices, that's when it gets dicey.

For instance, the Pharisees honored the prophets and their call to radical obedience, but when Jesus applied the prophets' teachings in the context of the religious practices, all hell broke loose because the prophets' blasts from the past were now aimed at themselves.

Thankfully there were Pharisees like Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea, as well as the unnamed Pharisees who warned Jesus about King Herod's plot to kill him, among others, who let down their guard and intently listened to Jesus, because they somehow realized he personified "the more excellent way."

This past week I attended a funeral for a fine and gentle young man. The notice in the paper said he "died suddenly," which is usually an innocuous euphemism for...well, you can draw your own conclusions.

This young man was any parents' dream. He was both intelligent and spiritual. In high school he made friends with everybody from Jocks to Goths. He was innately sensitive to other people's moods and needs and had a deepening love for God that was beautifully expressed in passages from his journals but especially in his relationships. When still a teenager he was asked to be a worship assistant in his church, he readily agreed and even considered going into the ministry. I myself knew this young man. He was the real deal.

But hidden underneath his infectious countenance was conflict, shame and struggle. At some point in his young life he finally accepted what was a growing yet unwelcome conviction about his sexual orientation. He was gay. Mind you, this wasn't what he wanted to be but who he was. He didn't wake up one morning and say to himself, "I think I'm going to put myself, my family and my relationship with God through the wringer by choosing a lifestyle that's out of favor with the culture and my church, just to shake things up. From now on, or at least for the short term, I'll be gay."

Of course what I just said was nonsense. Who would choose a gender orientation that would bring conflict and sadness to everyone concerned? We can only imagine his inner conflict. He wanted to serve his Lord, but according to his church's teachings, he was unworthy, not acceptable to minister to Christ through the people he wanted to love and serve.

People of good will can differ on interpretations of scripture. People of good will can draw vastly different conclusions over the issue of same gender relationships. But people of good will should be united in welcoming and accepting, the same way Christ welcomed and accepted you and me, anyone who asks to be included in our life together as a faith community.

On the first page of the Book of Order (the Constitution of the Presbyterian Church USA) is one of the foundational tenants of our Reformed faith. It reads: "Christ alone is Lord of the conscience."

In other words, it's not my job to dictate what you should believe. That's between you and God. But it is my job to challenge you to allow God, when it's God's will, to expand the boundaries of his Kingdom to include the outcasts of our generation, even when it's contrary to our lifelong sensibilities. Look at it this way, if Jesus can love you despite your shameful weaknesses, is it beyond the realm of possibility that Jesus might also love and embrace someone so unlike you, yet so much like you?

As we prepare ourselves to approach our Lord's Table, remember Jesus and his curious way of challenging us to think how we treat each other, knowing Jesus has already accepted us, just as we are warts and all. That alone is why we are able to come to this sacrament because God so loved the world he came to save us from ourselves and then love us into his Kingdom.

If you've placed your trust in Christ and believed he came to bridge the gap between God and us, but also with each other, then come to the table to share this great and mysterious feast he has prepared for us all.