

31 But strive for the greater gifts. And I will show you a still more excellent way.

13 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. 2 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. 3 If I give away all my possessions, and if I hand over my body so that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing.

4 Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant 5 or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; 6 it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. 7 It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

8 Love never ends. But as for prophecies, they will come to an end; as for tongues, they will cease; as for knowledge, it will come to an end. 9 For we know only in part, and we prophesy only in part; 10 but when the complete comes, the partial will come to an end. 11 When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child; when I became an adult, I put an end to childish ways. 12 For 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, even as I have been fully known. 13 And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love. **(New Revised Standard Version)**

We have a problem with this Bible reading. "We do?" I suspect this might be your response. Quickly followed by one of the following "But I KNOW this reading." "I LOVE this reading." "This was my wedding reading." "I have these words hanging on my wall." Or as has been said to me on more than one occasion "This is the most perfect piece of poetry ever written." We do have a problem with this Bible reading. It's not the sort of problem we have with many Bible readings, that being that we've never read them, they're totally foreign, we can't get into them. Nor is it the problem that we have with a few other Bible readings, that being that we don't like what we're hearing or reading one bit. The problem we have is the problem of over familiarity. This is true of several passages, but almost nothing beats this chapter. I once read a brief conversation between two pastors in which one had discovered that a google search yields hundreds of patterns for a First Corinthians 13 cross stitch. To which another pastor replied, "Bet it's easier to cross stitch it than to live it." And we're not saying cross stitch is easy. So many

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of our encounters with these words have made them saccharin sweet, like an old familiar melody that invites our conscious minds to check out as we drift down memory lane.

We KNOW these words. So we do not hear them.

But imagine being a member of that Corinthian congregation, countless weddings had taken place among them and these words were not read at any of them. They had had some good times since Paul brought the gospel to them. House churches springing up all over their busy, industrial city. They would meet for fellowship and encouragement in their smaller assemblies, but once a week they would get together for a meal, which we call communion, they called the Lord's Supper, for worship together. They were a group of human beings though, so what eventually happened? Divisions and disagreements, distress and discord. As we heard last week, this whole letter is a cry for unity among them. But consider some of the particulars of what Paul was responding to when he wrote this letter. It seems a competitive spirit had surfaced in worship. There was among them the perception that some spiritual gifts were superior to others, which led to the puffing up of those in possession of those particular gifts, and most likely the deflation of those lacking those particular gifts. As disturbing as this competitive ranking of spiritual gifts is, other more shocking and more deeply troubling scenarios were playing out in the Corinthian congregation: Highly broken sexual relationships between believers, believers dragging one another to civil courts- slapping lawsuits on one another, and oodles of disputes about what is appropriate in worship. And consider the way they were treating the Lord's Supper. Some would get there early, likely those who had more leisure time, likely the more privileged among them, and they would eat and drink their fill. When others would arrive there would be nothing for them, while their siblings in Christ were full and drunk. Can you even imagine how painful life must have become in this community by the time Paul was writing to them?

Paul was troubled by all the reports he had received about life in this Christian community. He had bigger dreams for them. He knew that a different quality of life was possible in the fellowship of Christ. But clearly they had a lot of work to do. He was a wise teacher. He consistently used images and words that were familiar to them in order

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to lead them into a way of life that was unfamiliar to them. And so it is with this passage. Starting with the end of chapter 12 when Paul urges them to strive for the greater gifts, trusting that they will be shown a still more excellent way. They were a community of strivers, those who strived for excellence, who wanted only the best. So Paul got their attention, by asking them to strive. And then with his introductory comments he held their attention, by first naming the gifts they treasured most highly, eloquent human and mysterious angelic speech. When he said "If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels...", several of them, no doubt, perked up thinking "he's talking about me!" When he went on to say "But have not love I am a noisy gong or clanging cymbal." They were, no doubt, stung. Especially because here too he used familiar images, what our Bibles translate as "noisy gong" is more literally translated "Echoing bronze", probably a reference to bronze acoustic vases that were used in the theater to echo and amplify the voices of the actors. Corinth was famous for its production of such bronze vessels. And all around Corinth were pagan worshipping communities who used cymbals in their worship. One scholar paraphrases this verse therefore in this way "Even if you can speak with the heavenly language of angels, but have not love, your high-toned speech has become like the empty echo of an actor's speech or the noise of frenzied pagan worship." Ouch. He worked his way through all the gifts that had the tendency to puff folks up, and yes, even self-sacrifice in the Christian community can have that ironic effect if done without love, and one by one reduced those gifts to nothing if they are exercised without the more excellent way, the greatest gift of love.

And then he goes on to define this love that is to inform how all their gifts are shared in community. And here's where we stop listening and start daydreaming. But imagine that you have never heard these words before, and you think you're pretty hot stuff, but you're a part of a community that is broken in all the ways I mentioned. Imagine hearing them then, "4 Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant 5 or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; 6 it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. 7 It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. 8 Love never ends." Imagine how they felt. They

were faced with a culture clash. The ideal that is lifted up is the fun house mirror image of their life together. They see themselves, the opposite of themselves in the mirror that Paul holds up with this definition of love. And speaking of mirrors, this too was a major export from Corinth. They knew all about mirror images.

I don't expect that when this letter was first read in public worship it was a warm and fuzzy Hallmark moment. The culture of their community was clashing with the culture to which Paul was calling them and I don't think it felt especially good.

And should it be a warm and fuzzy Hallmark moment when we read this passage in our community? Is this life of love perfectly embodied in our community? Do we share the gifts we've been given for the common good? Do we share our gifts in love? Patient, kind, non-competitive, community building love? Or does something else motivate the sharing of our gifts?

We are soaked in a culture that encourages behaviors that are quite opposed to the love ethic that Paul holds up- a culture that divides, that sets some above others, that teaches "Eat or be eaten. Kill or be killed." And how much time do we devote to being formed in this counter culture that the Gospel of Jesus Christ offers us? It's not like we can escape this world, nor even that is what to which we are to aspire. But do we think that this ethic of love is for the few hours we spend on church every week or that it's for every interaction of our lives? Even for those who deeply desire and who strive for such love in their daily lives, do you often find that it's a hard, very hard, certainly harder than cross stitch, thing to do? Particularly, perhaps, when navigating all manner of stress and anxiety?

We often think that love is just a matter of feelings. But if we're listening to our scripture reading, we realize that love is not, primarily, a feeling. As one scholar says "Feelings come and go, while love abides." All the attributes of love that Paul identifies are actions or dispositions, and they are not things we can will ourselves into. We can't wake up one morning and decide, "I'm going to be more loving" and just like that, with the snap of our fingers, live a perfect life of love. We learn these attributes, patience, kindness, not keeping a record of wrongs, overcoming irritability and resentment. We

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learn them slowly over time, hopefully with the help of our kindred in Christ. If this is the greatest gift God gives, should we not focus our whole life together on helping one another learn to love? Shouldn't the point of being the church be growth in love?

Throughout my ministry I've had parishioners confess, "I've been doing this church thing for so long now, but I don't know that I've learned anything, that I've grown at all." In some cases folks were facing struggles in their lives that they felt ill equipped to bear and this raised the question. Others were considering that they keep tripping over the same questions about God. Others were just not sure they could measure any change. But in every case, at least one sibling in Christ could look them in the eye and say "I see growth. You're growing in love."

One of those parishioners from the first church I served asked me that question at a Wednesday night Bible study, after asking me quite a different question the preceding Monday. On Monday he told me that he had noted that in the inserts in the back of the hymnals, with the words to the songs that we sometimes sang at the end of worship, the font was quite small and hard to read and there were typos and missing words. So he had typed up a larger version, with all the necessary corrections. And he wanted to make copies and cover up the current inserts. But he was nervous about this because he could tell that somebody had taken the time to type up that original insert on a typewriter and he didn't want to hurt anyone's feelings. I assured him that he would likely receive only appreciation for taking an action such as this. When he then shared a few days later that he didn't know if he'd learned anything or grown at all, I immediately thought of this action he had taken, and the sensitivity he embodied in taking it. I thought back to my earliest conversations with this man, a man who did not want to be asked to join anything, a man who did not want to come to worship with other people, a man who, at most, wanted to sit quietly with his wife in an empty church. Near the end of my ministry in my first call, he was coming with his wife to two Bible studies a week and worshipping with the community regularly. He later, long after I left, officially joined the church, and died in hope of the resurrection about five years ago. But his increased involvement in church is not the greatest evidence of his progress and growth. That he

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saw a need of the whole worshiping community, realized he could meet it, and set about to do so with gentleness and compassion- now that's a witness to growth in love. May we all be such witnesses.

Resource in addition to scripture which was cited in and influenced this sermon:
Hays, Richard B. 1997. First Corinthians in Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Preaching and Teaching. Louisville, KY: John Knox Press.