

“The Power of Love”

I Corinthians 13

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“And now these three remain: faith, hope and love, **but the greatest of these is love**” I Corinthians 13:13.

Calling anything the greatest is risky. As soon as you do, someone is ready to challenge you. When radio talk show entertainers want to light up the phone lines, they begin a conversation about who was the greatest athlete, politician or actor. It works every time.

I wonder what kind of response Paul got when he boldly declared that love was the greatest Christian virtue. After all, these people knew about love. They had the language to distinguish between different kinds of love, such as a love for a family member (storge), a friend (philia) or a lover (eros).

Corinth was also home to the temple to Aphrodite, the goddess of love. Talking about love was common for them, so I suppose Paul’s bold claim elicited quite a response.

There are many questions that emerge from our text this morning. What kind of love was Paul describing? What was different about it? Why did he feel the need to write about it at this time? Why did he consider love the highest Christian virtue?

Let me use the last question as our focus and see if I can answer the others in response to it. **Why did Paul consider love the highest virtue, greater than faith and hope?** Some have said it was because love is eternal. One day faith will become sight and hope will be realized. Love, however, will never cease to exist.

I see their point; however, I think there is another reason Paul elevated love above faith and hope. **I believe he was convinced love would build healthy communities or repair broken ones, and for Paul, this was crucial to spreading the gospel.**

The church in Corinth was broken and in danger of self-destructing. You recall from our study of last week’s text, I Corinthians 12:12-31, that it was embroiled in controversy, which was not unusual for them. They were fighting over who among them was the greatest and which spiritual gifts were most important. Obviously, this created a lot of tension, jealousy and strife.

In the midst of Paul’s letter to them about his broad and inclusive concept of ministry, he changes direction and writes about the importance of love in building and sustaining healthy relationships. Why did he do this?

What was missing in their church? It wasn’t zeal, spiritual gifts, or passion the members lacked. It was love.

Did you notice that everything Paul mentioned in the first three verses of our text was good: speaking eloquently and clearly, understanding the mysteries of life, exercising mountain-moving faith, sharing resources with others and being willing to die for the cause of Christ?

One thing was missing, though, and that was love, and this was causing their problem. Their extraordinary gifts, grand abilities or extravagant actions were empty without love. They were merely self-serving and self-indulgent.

Paul knew that love could save their church because it could repair and restore their damaged relationships. So what did he challenge them to do?

Form relationships around the deepest level of love, the kind that puts others' needs ahead of their own and makes sacrifices on behalf of family, friends, strangers and even enemies. Build relationships upon a love that called them to think beyond their own desires, see beyond the immediacy of the moment, embrace diversity, listen and learn from others, carry others' burdens, look at their own flaws and extend grace to those whose flaws had been exposed. Build relationships upon a love that was the antithesis of self-importance or self-display.

"Love is patient; love is kind. Love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way. It 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 and endures all things. Love never ends" I Corinthians 13:4-8a.

This is a mature love, isn't it, a grown-up love? It requires that we put away childish thoughts and ways.

Where have you observed this kind of love recently? I witnessed it when the members of this church reached out to Max and Kathryn Harris' family after their sudden deaths. I saw it as Nonie Williams' dear friends walked with her family through the valley of the shadow of death and lovingly helped them carry their heavy burden.

I see it frequently through the many expressions of unconditional love that our young parents lavish on their children, especially when the children are struggling. I see it almost every week when our members respond to the financial needs of the people of this community through the local Cooperative Ministries and our own Families in Need program.

On a broader scale, I heard it last week in Phil Mickelson's response to a reporter's question. When asked what he thought Tiger Woods' absence on the Pro Tour would mean or when he thought Tiger would return, he kindly responded, "Tiger and Elin are my friends. I wish nothing but the best for them. They need time to work out their problems and Amy and I hope they do. I'll not say anymore about this today or anytime soon." That's a mature love.

Where would you like to see this kind of mature love? Where do you think it is needed most? Is it your home, school, workplace, civic club, neighborhood, at our church, among your friends or in our nation? Are you willing to take the lead to make it a reality?

I think all of us want the kind of relationships that Paul described in this passage. We long for this level of understanding, maturity and behavior.

What I am not as certain about, however, is whether we want to help create or restore them. Are we willing to be the mature and loving adult in the places where they are lacking?

Yesterday, I read an encouraging article in The Christian Century titled, "Clergy Unite to Urge: Thou Shalt be Civil." Two dozen New Orleans clergy recently drafted and began circulating a "Faith Statement on Public Discourse." It urges members of their congregation and the public to show basic respect to those with whom they disagree.

These religious leaders, Christian, Jew and Muslim, are disturbed by the lack of civil discourse that is taking place in our country. It is common to see people demonizing each other, shouting each other down and gleefully circulating vicious email messages distorting the other side.

What breaks their hearts is that the people doing these things are good people. Ginger Taylor noticed at a town hall meeting she attended that the people acting so ugly were the ones "who go to church, mow each others' lawns when they're sick, bring a pot of soup over. But that evening, they were shouting at each other and so distorting each others' ideas that the event amounted to 'bumper sticker discourse.' "

Their statement on public discourse calls on people to display respect for those with whom they disagree; to debate issues, not demonize opponents; to stop misrepresenting opponents' views and to stop email messages that demonize or humiliate persons or groups."

Does this strike a chord with you? It does me. I am gravely concerned about the tone and temperament of our public discussions and have been for decades. I sense this toxic attitude is seeping into all our relationships. Are you willing to be the mature, responsible, loving adult who turns this around?

Who can help you? I believe the one who was a victim far too often of good people's immaturity and graceless behavior can. The one who was run out of Nazareth and almost killed after he preached his first sermon in the synagogue can help us. (Luke 4:21-30) Jesus knows how important this is. Will you ask for his help?

Which of your relationships is fragile right now? Is your home on the brink of coming apart? Do you have friendships that are teetering? Are you in groups filled with tension and strife?

What can you do this week to change the tone and temperament? Ask God to show you and help you do it. I know it can be done because love is that powerful.

"And now these three remain: faith, hope and love, **but the greatest of these is love**"
Let's show them this week that this really is true.