

Lenten Reflection on 1 Corinthians 13:1-13
By James Erlandson

I feel it is kind of ironic to say that I have never preached on this text except for weddings, when we know that this passage has nothing to do with marriage or romance – except indirectly. It is about *love*, actually (which is the title for a recent romantic movie), but not about the love you think. We are so used to hearing this passage at weddings, that whenever we hear the opening words “*If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but have not love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal*”, our imaginations go directly to pictures of beautiful brides in white dresses, or my favorite memory, a scripture reader saying the words, “1 Corinthians” to introduce the reading.

But the REAL setting for this passage, and Paul’s first letter to the church in Corinth, is a congregation embroiled in conflict and dissension. This young congregation which Paul had founded, was arguing in his absence over leadership, struggling with issues of sexual morality, suing one another in court, and whether Christians should eat food offered in sacrifice to pagan idols. But worst of all, Paul writes, is how the church in Corinth was abusing table fellowship, excluding some from the Lord’s Supper – with some eating all the food and letting others go hungry. So the Lord’s Supper was no longer a common meal, but another symbol of their divisions. Not that the Church in Corinth was unique in having such problems – we find our own divisions today over leadership, sex, lawsuits, and even over the Lord’s Supper – so division has a long history in the Church!

But the Corinthians were even divided over the spiritual gifts they had received through the Holy Spirit! They argued over which gifts were greater or greatest! They had misconstrued the *variety and diversity* of their God-given gifts with a *hierarchy and difference in the value* of those gifts! I’m shocked, shocked that humans would misunderstand a gift from God and seek advantage! Actually, not really. It’s pretty common to argue over diversity within the human family and make it a basis for divisions among us, to value our own gifts more (or less) than others. We have consistently failed to see that part of the value of our neighbor’s gift is that it is different from ours – meaning, it is a gift *we don’t have*. The Body of Christ depends upon each child of God bringing their valued gift and ability to the table for the common good – whether it is as a prophet, messenger, teacher, healing, deeds of power, leadership, or tongues. None is greater than the other.

So Paul’s main argument against the Church in Corinth is that the Christians there have lost their way. They have missed the point, they have misunderstood the greatest gift of all from God: that is, *the gift of love*. With all the many gifts of God which build up the Church, which have no hierarchy in God’s eyes, there are greater gifts – called *faith, hope, and love, and the greatest of these is love*.

Of course, it is not emotional love, or romance that Paul is talking about – we know that. It is the love of God, known as *agape*, a love which is self-giving, unconditional, and never ending. This is a point I make in marriage sermons when preaching on this text – because loving partners need to know that there is a distinct kind of love beyond romance which is able to sustain them in their life together. It is the same for all of us within the Church, and as we relate to other people – our families, our neighbors, our co-workers, acquaintances, even our enemies. Jesus called us to love one another, as God has first loved us, and *love your neighbor as yourself*. This love is not an abstract notion – God’s love comes in concrete action – with active verbs! *Love means: be patient! Be kind. Do not be envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. Love means do not insist on your own way, do not be irritable or resentful, do not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoice in the truth. Just love! Bear all things, believe all things, hope all things, endure all things. Because love is the absolute greatest gift!*

These days in our world and in our nation, with all our divisions over politics, sexuality, religion, race or culture, we need to hear these words ourselves and heed them. For our gifts: spiritual, physical, or intellectual – even though they are, indeed, God-given – will not save us. We will only be sustained in this life, and through our many challenges today, by our *faith in God, by our hope in God’s promises of mercy and new life, but most of all, by our love for God and one another!* Leadership is needed from the Church, from all faith communities – Christian, Jew, Muslim, Buddhist, all leaders of faith who share this value of God’s love for the whole human family. For without love, anything we do can become like a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal – just a lot of noise and distraction. But with God’s love living in us, inspiring us to concrete actions of love for our neighbor, we can bring civility back to our national debates, mercy to our treatment of immigrants and refugees, justice and equity to our nation’s laws, respect for our diversity, and unity and friendship that will overcome our differences.

I pray that this love will fill us in the Church today, and overflow out of you and me to our families, friends, neighbors, and even those whom we have considered adversaries or enemies, to bring us all together in one great embrace, in the arms of God, who loves each human being as a beloved child. But it all begins with love, from God for you, for me, and every living thing. Thanks be to God. Amen.