



Roanoke, Virginia
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***“Love
Habits of the Heart”***

I Corinthians 13
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This is the second of a four part sermon series on core values: values of the Christian faith, values of this congregation, values reflecting both who we are and who we are striving to become.

The value we raise today is “Love.” Our passage, I Corinthians 13, is known as the “Love Passage” and is often chosen for weddings. In pre-marital conversations, I ask engaged couples to notice that this passage is not “Love American style, truer than the red white and blue.”

Actually, I don’t put it that way. If I did, I would be met with blank stares. *Love American Style* went off the air *44 years ago*.

What I do tell the couples, and what I have said from this pulpit several times, is that I Corinthians 13 is not about feelings, but about behavior. Still, that makes the passage an excellent choice for weddings, even better than the love poetry of the Song of Solomon in my opinion, because what holds a marriage together is not keeping romance alive (though that is a good idea), but implementing strategies that keep a partnership successful.

Yes, I know how that sounds. I won’t stand up at my golden anniversary celebration, held in Paris and paid for in full by my three daughters (they don’t know it yet), and offer a toast saying, “Here’s to my wife, Millie, who successfully implemented with me strategies for our remaining together for five decades.” I might not offer a toast at all because while I Corinthians 13 may not be about feelings, I am, and I might be too emotional to speak.

But I Corinthians 13 is sound pastoral advice for helping marriage work.

In fact, we can leave marriage aside, and take the pastoral advice of the passage on the road. The Love Passage offers excellent pastoral advice for *any* relationship or community that wants to hang together in a way that dignifies rather than degrades relationships. It is good advice for



friends, for neighborhoods, for businesses, for legislative bodies... and it is good pastoral advice for churches.

Indeed, it was for churches that Paul wrote this passage. Paul wrote it for the church in Corinth; which is to say, the house churches of Corinth. The church needed to hear what you are about to hear. Listen for God's guidance for you:

If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not 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 have not love, I am nothing. ³ If I give away all I have, and if I deliver my body to be burned, but have not love, I gain nothing.

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

⁸ Love never ends; as for prophecies, they will pass away; as for tongues, they will cease; as for knowledge, it will pass away. ⁹ For our knowledge is imperfect and our prophecy is imperfect; ¹⁰ but when the perfect comes, the imperfect will pass away. ¹¹ When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child; when I became a man, I gave up childish ways. ¹² For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall understand fully, even as I have been fully understood. ¹³ So faith, hope, love abide, these three; but the greatest of these is love.

Paul is saying to the Corinthian Church, "Here is what love of God and neighbor looks like." The city of Corinth, and the world, needs the witness of a church that knows how to... well, **behave!**

Some in Corinth might jump quickly to the city's defense. They would point to the city's prosperity. As a thriving port city connecting east and west, it is fed continuously by imports of goods and of people. Walking down Corinth's crowded streets is to experience an amazing variety of sight and sound. It is to see a stunning display of skin hues and clothing styles reflecting different cultures. It is to hear a stunning array of languages and dialects.

Diversity of sights, of sounds and of faiths: In the city's center, you can find temples of Hera, Octavia, Venus, Fortuna, Hermes, Heracles, and Poseidon. There is even a temple with the inscription, "For all the Gods." For the Corinthians, the many religions are like the offerings of a buffet line. Pick and choose whatever suits your spiritual tastes and needs.

But diversity does not always mean dignity. Some of these temples are chapels for ethnic, nationalistic, and economic interests. They do not provide a counter-balance but give added weight to the worst excesses of Corinth, baptizing the excesses as virtues. For, yes, Corinth is one of the



most prosperous cities of the Roman Empire. How could it not be with all the goods flowing in and out of it? But Corinth is often a rough and cruel place because of the behavior of the elites, the behavior of the working class, the behavior of the poor, and the behavior of those who sail in and out of the city looking to enjoy what a wide open city like Corinth can offer. The worst problem that Paul sees is that familiar divide between the incredibly rich and desperately poor. The economic disparity is so severe, one commentator I consulted called it, “functional slavery.”¹

That’s the city. Here’s the church: The glory of the Corinthian Church is its diversity, so unlike most American churches today. America may be diverse, but its churches often represent a collection of “alike”- alike skin color, alike economic status, alike cultural tradition. The Corinthian Church is highly diverse and Paul loves this about it. He sees in the church the aftershocks of the Gospel explosion of Pentecost that broke through dividing lines of race, nationality, gender, economic status, custom and religious background. He sees Jews joining with Gentiles of different nations and faiths because they are all drawn to the good news of Jesus. They gather to dine together, adopting each other’s dinner traditions and cuisines, and then afterwards, studying together about what it means to be the “people of the way,” which is what the early followers of Christ were called.

That’s the church’s glory.

Here is the church’s shame: The church, though diverse, finds ways to be divided. Within the church, there is gossip and shaming due to differences. What bugs Paul the most is the arrogance of the rich toward the poor. He talks about how the rich show up early for family night dinners so they can enjoy their expensive cuisines, and then, stick around to eat some of what the working class bring to church.

Paul doesn’t want the Corinthian Church to blow it. Paul sees this glorious opportunity the church has to show Corinth- hey, with Corinth connecting east and west, to show the world- a better way of being community. The church has the opportunity to be what Paul describes as “a body of Christ,” a body with different, diverse parts all coming together to do the will of the head. With Christ as head, the Corinthian church can witness to the reconciling power of Jesus Christ that brings people together rather than tears them apart.

In I Corinthians 13, Paul keeps it positive, but you can almost hear him shout to the church to *behave!* “I don’t care how successful you think you are,” Paul says, “even in areas celebrated by the church: speaking in tongues, being prophetic, being theological. Without love, none of it means anything. Be patient! Be kind! Please, don’t be jealous, or arrogant, or rude! Love doesn’t rejoice in wrong, but rejoices in what is of God. Love speaks the truth. Love reconciles and heals. Love welcomes to God’s table all who need God’s grace.”

Is Paul shouting loud enough to be heard by Second Presbyterian today?

Let’s be clear, our congregation is not the same as the Corinthian Church. We compare both negatively and positively. Negatively, we are not nearly as diverse ethnically and socio-economically. On the positive side, though, we are a church that has been remarkably unified

¹ Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza. *Harper’s Bible Dictionary*, Harper and Row, San Francisco, 1988, p. 1168.



throughout our history. It really is quite remarkable that since the church's founding in 1891, this church has never known a significant split. It is sad that's an accomplishment to note, but it is. Through Roanoke's early days as a rough railroad town, through the depression and two world wars, and since 9/11 we have hung together.

Nonetheless, this congregation- any congregation bearing the name of Jesus- would do well to heed the pastoral advice of our passage. We should think about our life together, as the survey included in the bulletin encourages us to do. In some ways, we can hear, "Keep it up." In other ways we can hear, "We can do better."

I invite you to consider two things to keep us grounded in Paul's pastoral advice. First, **our unity in diversity is our witness**. I could talk about that in many ways, but one obvious way is suggested by Paul's image of the church being a body of many members. What involves part of us has to do with all of us.

I'll use two Bible Schools and myself as an example. Last night, a church team returned from the Dominican Republic. Together with Dominican partners, they led a children's Bible School with storytelling, skits, songs, crafts and snacks in poor barrios in San Juan de la Maguana. There was even *speaking in tongues*. Three tongues actually: English, Spanish, and the common language of love.

You know what I did? Nothing. I didn't go on the trip. I didn't do any work planning for it. Many people did work. As far as pastors go, Rachel Thompson did the work and helped lead the team. I didn't have a spouse, child, or grandchild on the team. But this congregation doesn't exist just for people like me. If you are like me, I hope you know how that trip was all about us. That was our team, those were our adults and young adults. If lives were changed in any way, we were a part of it.

Unless we weren't. Unless we didn't care, didn't pray, didn't give anything, and have no interest in how God might have been at work in what happened over there.

If you just thought, "Of course I care!", that response illustrates Paul's point. "Of course, we all care. We are all part of one body."

That was last week's Bible School far away. This week's Bible School is near at hand. This coming week, there will be over a hundred volunteers providing an incredible Bible School. During the week, children will be learning that walking in the way of Christ means

- serving others (that's Monday)
- loving our neighbors (that's Tuesday)
- loving those who have made mistakes (that's Wednesday)
- obeying God (that's Thursday)
- and honoring the Sabbath with a day off (that's Friday)

Along the way, they'll practice with each other being patient and kind, not rejoicing in the wrong but rejoicing in what each other is making and learning, bearing and believing all things because we have this wonderful God who loves us.



And what have I personally done to make it happen? Hardly anything. As far as ministers go, it was our seminary intern, Jennifer Powell, who wrote the curriculum. It was Jennifer and Elizabeth Link who worked with the army of volunteers, and it will be Rachel Thompson who will join them in having an active role this week. I don't have any children or grandchildren who will attend the Bible School. But shouldn't we all be thrilled that our church is providing this Bible School this week, and children of *our church family* as well as children of *our community* are getting to experience it?

I'll stick with this Bible School a bit longer to draw our vision wider to all the programs and activities of the life of this church. On Thursday I saw someone who has been a member of this church for only a couple of years, with no children or grandchildren in the program, happily working on the bulletin board at the end of Kirk Hall by the piano. Why?

Because this is her church, these are her church's children who are being served, her Middlers who are helping, her congregation that is giving money to pay the bills and supply the facilities.

By the way, though care will be taken, I can promise you there will be wear and tear on the facilities. That is why our Property Committee looks to the maintenance and upkeep of the facilities because the Bible School belongs to the Property Committee as well.

By claiming any part of the life of the church- supporting it, praying for it, being a part in paying for it, rejoicing in it- we witness to a diversity that finds its unity in Christ. When members visit shut-ins, when the church provides a reception after a funeral, when young adults try to win a kickball game, when men gather for a baseball game, when members host a dinner for guests at the Alpha Omega or tutor children at the PCC, that is all of us making a witness... that is, if we truly care that we are doing it, supporting it all, praying for it all, and glad for the world to know we are doing it all.

Now to my second point. Our witness is in our diversity, but **diversity is not uniformity**. The church is not a "No Disagreement Zone." Our unity does not have to end when disagreements begin. The Gospel is not served by ignoring differences and avoiding issues. The shining witness the church can make in a divided world is more clearly seen in how we love each other even when we disagree.

Unity in Christ is not uniformity of opinion. This is really Paul's main point. Paul would never say otherwise because the church would never have included Gentiles if the church was to avoid anything controversial.

Unity in Christ does mean "staying in our lane;" always thinking biblically and theologically. That is our calling because that is our voice.

Unity in Christ also means dealing with each other in the way Paul describes in our passage: with patience and kindness, without arrogance or boasting, not rejoicing in the wrong but rejoicing in the right, with forbearance and grace... toward each other and toward oneself.

That's the witness we have to offer! The world doesn't need from this church position papers and settled answers where one side has to be right. Even those who act and talk that way know deep down that life is more complex and that easy answers are rubbish on their own.



What the world does need to see is the joyful, graceful, healing power of love working within the community of those who bear the name of Jesus Christ. The world needs to see a church struggling with the same issues of life they are... only in a better way... in a more humble and graceful way as described by Paul... in a way that is about listening, and respecting, and praying... in a way *that is loving*.

I'll close with Paul's closing. What we believe keeps us grounded. That we hope keeps us going. But of faith, hope and love, the greatest is love, because in the end, love, not uniformity, is what unites us together in perfect harmony.

