

“A Question of Priorities”

(Last of three sermons on “The Corinthian Questions.”)

I Corinthians 12:31 – 13:13

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Mary Taylor Memorial United Methodist Church, Milford, Connecticut

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This message is the last of a three-part series on “The Corinthian Questions.” Today’s message, “A Question of Priorities,” makes the nervy assertion that if we do not cultivate love, even the most desirable spiritual gift is useless.

Overstated? Not if we follow Paul’s lead and the scripture on which the message is based. It is part of his letter to the church in Corinth, Greece, which he founded in 50 A.D. on his second missionary journey. At over ½ million people on the east-west trade route, this largest Greek city was a cosmopolitan port with a kaleidoscope of peoples, cultures and religious beliefs. This diversity had become divisive within the church after Paul’s departure, so he writes to them to address these divisions.

In the first two messages, available on-line or in the rear of the church, we watched Paul weave his message of unity in diversity. He established that each of us has a gift given by God; that we are the body of Christ; and that each gift is necessary for the effective functioning of the body. Like a well-made oriental rug, Paul’s tapestry is both beautiful and practical, appealing to our value as individuals and as part of a covenant community, working together.

Yet Paul says clearly that, without love, such gifts are worthless. Are you bilingual, speaking “*in the tongues of mortals and of angels?*” Awesome! But if you don’t have love, you are no more than a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. In Paul’s time the worship of the Greek gods Dionysus and Cybele was characterized by the clanging of cymbals. Even the gift of tongues, ecstatic speech believed to be inspired by the Holy Spirit, is no better than the uproar of pagan worship if love is absent.

Have you “*all faith, so as to remove mountains?*” After all, Jesus said “*If you have faith the size of a mustard seed, you will say to this mountain, ‘Move from here to there,’ and it will move...*” (Matt.17:20). Yet faith not tempered by love can be cruel. A person was told by their doctor that their heart was tired and they must rest. This was communicated to the patient’s employer, self-identified as a Christian. The boss responded “I have an inward strength that enables me to carry on.” These may have been true enough and certainly were words of faith, but a faith uncoupled from love and therefore a hurting thing.

Giving generously, spiritual wisdom, even martyrdom, without love, leaves the giver empty-handed. Many deeds that appear sacrificial are borne of pride and not devotion.

Perhaps this is an affront to some, practically minded and unaware of the nature of Christian love. For some of us, our thinking runs: “*Why must I feel kindly towards others if I am using the gift God has given me for the betterment of myself and the Christian community?*”

Kind feelings, however desirable and well-intentioned, are not the essence of Christian love. Paul’s meaning is instructive by the Greek words he does ***not*** use, as many of you already know. He does not use *phili*os, friendship love or so-called “brotherly” love, as in the name “*Philadelphia*.” He does not use *eros*, romantic or sexual love, especially noteworthy in Corinth since the “city of Aphrodite” had a deserved reputation for sexual immorality. He does not use *storge*, affection, as one has for those whom we choose because they are like-minded to us in one manner or another.

The word Paul uses is *agape*, a willed concern for the well-being of another person. It is the highest form of love precisely because it does not depend on feelings. Instead, we make a decision of the will to care for the well-being of another, sometimes even when we do not like them or their behavior.

In her book Soul Calling, Julie Ruth Harley observes:

“As a parent of young children, I am reminded of this lesson almost daily. When their behavior certainly does not merit love, we are called to discipline our children while still maintaining unconditional love for them. Following through in this way requires restraint that comes naturally to very few of us....I have to stop, take some deep breaths, and remember that peace I once felt in my daughter’s more angelic moments. Doing this restores my spirit enough so that I can speak to them from my abiding love for them rather than from my anger in the moment. Then I wonder how my parents put up with me as a child, and I realize my life as a humble servant is not going to end anytime soon.”

I Corinthians 13 reminds me of the job description of a pastor in the U.M. Book of Discipline: nobody can do it. Paul lists 15 characteristics of agape love that require a lifetime to cultivate. Why try?

What better way to spend our lifetime? However long or short it shall be—and no one knows that—what better way to spend our days than cultivating love? This question is not rhetorical. As the Scottish Bible commentator William Barclay declares: *“Hardly any passage in scripture demands such self-examination from the good [person] as this.”* (1) Love was for the Corinthians, and remains for us, “a question of priorities.” Paul’s poem was placed in his letter at precisely this spot to remind the Corinthians that whatever other gifts they might cultivate, the gift that all of us are to cultivate is the gift of love. Love, willing the well-being of others, is put first. Love is the #1 priority.

The beauty of Paul’s poem is found in what it reflects: the spirit of Jesus. On this Communion Sunday our Lord’s words come to mind: *“Love one another as I have loved you”* (John 15:12). *“No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends”* (15:13) *“...so I have loved you; abide in my love. If you keep my commandments you will abide in my love...”* (15:9-10). The commandments to which Jesus refers are summarized as loving God above all and one’s neighbor as oneself; and his immortal admonition, *“Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.”*

(1) Barclay, William, The Daily Study Bible Series: the Letters to the Corinthians, Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1975, p. 119.

This love that can be commanded, which is a decision of the will, is learned by experience. Most who learn to live it have received it. When we know what it is to be loved; when someone has placed loving us—despite all our imperfections—at the top of their priority list; we never forget. It reaches deep in our soul to inspire us to do the same.

I know it's Super Bowl Sunday, and my closing story should probably be about the parents of the two coaches today, brothers for whom the parents will find a way to love despite the rivalry.

But if it's Super Bowl Sunday, can baseball be far away? A few of you will recognize the name of Dave Dravecky. He pitched the 1984 San Diego Padres to their first World Series. Big dollars. Stardom. Popularity. Traded to the San Francisco Giants, more of the same. Until cancer. In his arm. His pitching arm. So weak it broke. Therapy. Radiation. It broke again. The cancer was so bad that his multi-million dollar arm and the shoulder to which it was attached had to be amputated.

No one would fault Dave Dravecky from giving up. On life. On God. But Dave Dravecky is a Christian, a motivational speaker, and alive today. Here's how HE made the point about love:

I'm not going to pound you over the head with a Bible. But one thing I want you to know: faith is what makes this man tick. Without Jesus Christ in my life, I am nothing. Without him, there is no comeback. It's not all bad, losing an arm. My son can hug me for all he's worth now, and it doesn't hurt any more. Even an arm isn't more valuable than love.

If the question is priorities, the answer is love.