

Leviticus 19:9-18
1 Corinthians 13:1-13

6th Sunday After Epiphany, Year C
Midway Presbyterian Church
February 13, 2022

The More Excellent Way

Introduction to the Old Testament Lesson

In the 19th chapter of the Old Testament book of Leviticus we find a list of laws that God instructs Moses to share with the people of Israel. One of them speaks of loving our neighbor. Holiness is to be manifested in the lives we live. Listen to these words from Leviticus 19:9-18...

Introduction to the Epistle Lesson

Our Epistle Lesson today is that great Hymn of Love in First Corinthians 13. It's a favorite passage to be read at weddings and is chosen for this Sunday because tomorrow is Valentine's Day. But Paul was not thinking about romantic love when he was writing this letter to the congregation in Corinth. On his mind was a church that was divided over a number of issues. Some were envious, boastful, angry, rude, and insisting on their own way. This doesn't sound like Midway, but all of us can benefit from Paul's declarations. Listen to these words from 1 Corinthians 13:1-13...

Sermon

It's fascinating how 1 Corinthians 13 is used in Christian circles as a declaration of love and unity. The last verse is practically an anthem of Christian weddings in the western world. It is offered when all is well and fellowship is working its greatest work: two people, two families are uniting. It is often printed on napkins and programs. It even appears on wedding balloons and engraved on wedding rings. It is an affirmation for the ceremony of marriage.

“Faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love.” (v. 13)

How ironic, considering that 1 Corinthians was written in response to the opposite situation. Paul declares love as the greatest power in a community that seems to be lacking in love. It's a far cry from a loving couple standing at the altar declaring unwavering devotion, “in plenty and in want, in joy and in sorrow, in sickness and in health, as long as we both shall live.”

In this early church there were married and unmarried men and women as well as children. There were slaves and free people, and people with a variety of spiritual gifts. While most of its members were converted Gentiles, this body also included Jews. In fact, some of these Jewish members were rather powerful figures who served as former synagogue leaders, like Crispus, who was baptized by Paul himself, and Sosthenes, who is mentioned in the very first verse of the letter. While some of the members were from the lower classes, others were of higher rank and resources.

Unfortunately, the diversity among the Corinthians dissolved into discord and rivalry. They took sides, with some saying they are of one teacher and some of another. This was a community fragmented, rather than enriched, by their differences.

Now in the preceding 12th chapter, Paul says that he does not want the Corinthians to be ignorant about spiritual gifts, “There are a variety of gifts, but the same Lord.” (v. 5) And there are many members of this body of Christ with different gifts.

Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it. And God has appointed in the church first apostles, second prophets, third teachers; then deeds of power, then gifts of healing, forms of assistance, forms of leadership, various kinds of tongues. Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Are all teachers? Do all work miracles? Do all possess gifts of healing? Do all speak in tongues? Do all interpret? (vv. 27-30)

Then in that last verse of chapter 12 Paul says, “But strive for the greater gifts. And I will show you a still more excellent way.” (v. 31)

Well, in chapter 13 Paul explains what he means by this “more excellent way,” with a teaching about love, which he declares is the greatest gift of God. In his poem, Paul plays down the allure of spiritual gifts and functions. Tongues, prophesy, knowledge, miracles, servanthood to the point of death are important, but they still do not qualify as the “more excellent way.” (1 Corinthians 12:31). Love is the key, for without love, all the other gifts amount to nothing.

Paul underscores the primacy of love in 1 Corinthians 13 because it is the spiritual resource the Corinthians lack most. He describes “the work of love” in terms of what it is, and what it is not. Paul says love is patient, kind, and selfless. It involves truth-telling, fortitude, constancy, and tolerance.

In terms of what love “is not,” he says it is not self-seeking, short-tempered, and offensive. In other words, love does not hurt people. It does not damage prospects for authentic community. Love does not impede affirmation of another’s humanity.

Sir John Templeton spent the first part of his life making money—lots of money—and the last part of his life giving it away. In 1973 he established the Templeton Prize for progress in religion and awarded the prize first to Mother Teresa. Then in 1987 he formed the Templeton Foundation to promote research on what Sir John called the “Big Questions,” questions dealing with the intersection of science, faith, God, and the purpose of humanity.

Templeton came of age during the Scopes trial, which was held near his home in Winchester, Tennessee. A Presbyterian by upbringing, he was determined to do what he could to find common ground between science and religion. If science could study religious experience, perhaps such study might foster understanding of what he called “spiritual realities.” Foremost among these realities for Sir John was unlimited love. In the summer prior to 9/11, Case Western Reserve University received over \$8 million from the foundation to underwrite research on unlimited love. Maybe they should have just studied 1 Corinthians 13.

Paul first calls notes two aspects of discipleship that are unassailable in most Christian communities: sacrificial giving and social action. “If I give away all that I have and if I deliver my body to be burned, I gain nothing.” These actions come as close as any can to the more excellent way Paul is commending, but even in an act of sacrifice on behalf of the neighbor, the love that really is love can be missing. If we deliver Meals on Wheels and do not remove ourselves from the center of our concern, so that there is room to be with and for others, then we might as well have stayed home. If we place a contribution in the offering plate and only think that we are paying our dues, we gain nothing. If we have faith far greater than a mustard seed, but are woefully lacking in love for our neighbor, we are nothing. If we do not have Christ’s love within us, compelling us, filling us, day by day, “it profits us nothing.”

The love that Paul is talking about here in 1 Corinthians is understood by the Greek word *agapé*. It’s a word not commonly used in other literature of that time but appears more than three hundred times in the New

Testament. And it is a perfect word to describe this “most excellent way.” A perfect word to a conflicted congregation caught up in a distorted spirituality.

This is a love that focuses on the well-being of the other. John uses it in his Gospel in that familiar chapter 3, verse 16:

For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.

So how do people acquire this greatest of all the spiritual gifts? Paul knows only Christ can create this kind of love in otherwise self-centered human beings. In his book *Ethics* Dietrich Bonhoeffer said,

What is here called love is not this general principle but the utterly unique event of the laying down of the life of Jesus Christ for us....The New Testament answers the question ‘What is love?’ quite unambiguously by pointing solely and entirely to Jesus Christ. (p. 54)

And when Paul considers this *agapé* love revealed in Christ, he looks not primarily to the teachings of Jesus or to the deeds of his life. Rather does Paul focus on the cross. For in the cross, Jesus gave himself completely for us and our salvation. He became the Lamb of God to take away the sin of the world. And just as Christ gives us all the lesser gifts, he will also give us this greatest of gifts. He is the way, the truth, and the life. (Jn. 14:6a) And he will lead us into a “more excellent way.”

Along with faith and hope, Paul declares that this love abides through time and eternity. Nothing can separate us from this love that we know in Christ Jesus our Lord. Now we see by reflection, as in a mirror dimly, but one day we will see face to face. Yes, one day with Paul and Mother Teresa, with Sir John Templeton and Dietrich Bonhoeffer, and with all God’s people, we will see Love face to face and appreciate fully that God is Love, and all who live in love live in God, and God lives in them. (1 Jn. 4:16)

“And now, faith, hope, and love abide, these three; but the greatest of these is love.” Amen.