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1 Corinthians 13

“State of the Church: 8. A More Difficult Way”

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By the time they found him in the Pit of Despair, he was already dead. But he was the only man who could help them win against the evil plot concocted by Prince Humperdinck and Count Rugan, the man with six fingers on his right hand. They would need a miracle. They loaded Westley into the wagon and hauled him over to Miracle Max’s hut. When they had finally convinced the magician that he was the only one who could help them and exact revenge on Prince Humperdinck at the same time, he stuck a contraption in Westley’s mouth which looked suspiciously like the bellows from his fireplace. He filled his lungs with the air from the bellows, and asked him what it was that was worth living for. As the miracle man pushed the air from Westley’s chest, they heard escape from his lips, “True love.”

I won’t spoil the ending for you if you haven’t seen *The Princess Bride*, but it’s hard for me to think about love without first thinking of that scene in Miracle Max’s hut, and later in the movie, when the evil Prince Humperdinck is about to marry Princess Buttercup, the priest with the speech impediment mutters something about twoo wuv.

It’s all so romantic, and that is so often how we hear the words Paul writes to the church in Corinth. This is such a classic wedding text, but it’s almost embarrassing to use the words from the 13th chapter of 1st Corinthians in a wedding when we consider why Paul writes them.

We have spent the last seven weeks talking about all that has been going on in the church over in Corinth. Paul spent an amazing amount of ink writing about the quarreling and divisions that have occurred in the church. He chastises them for their limited understanding of baptism and their spiritual immaturity. He rails against the sexual immorality within the church *of which they boast*; he preaches against the way they take their differences outside the church for a secular court to settle; he launches into a tirade about marriage and the role of marriage partners, and ends that discourse with a surprising warning about women’s head coverings. He scolds them about their behavior concerning the meat that was sacrificed to idols, and criticizes the manner in which they have abused the Lord’s Supper and those in the church who come to participate in it.

Just before our reading this morning, Paul launches into a discussion of the nature of spiritual gifts and the treatment of weaker members by the ones who perceive themselves to be of greater importance. It seems that there are folks in the church who are *wealthy* and others who are *blue collar* workers. There are some who have been *Christians* longer than others. There are those who are *strong leaders* and others who are put in their societal *or spiritual* place. Throughout the letter, Paul is reminding the Corinthian Christians that *in Christ*, they are all *the same*. While given different gifts and different jobs, the gifts and the jobs are to be used for one another and for Christ, not for self-indulgence or selfish gain.

So keeping all these things in mind, the fighting, boasting, self-serving achievements, stepping on others, neglecting the welfare of others, and even considering one person or one group to be of greater importance or to hold greater power than another, we read Paul’s words from our lesson this morning. He ends our previous section on spiritual gifts by instructing them to strive for the greater gifts, the gifts that build up the body, and concludes by saying that if they do these things, he will show them a still more excellent way. And what is it that is worth living for if it is not true love?

But the love of which Paul speaks is not the *eros* love that we share with a spouse or our children, or parents, or siblings, though that is a powerful thing. The love of which Paul speaks is an *agape* love which is only possible

from God. In Christ, and *only* with Christ, can we experience that kind of love, the self-sacrificing love which builds up Christ's body and hurts none.

And so it is through this lens that we read this section of Paul's letter. A paraphrase might read something like this:

Listen to all these things and try to do them, and I will tell you about an *even better way*. For some of you are boasting that you can speak in tongues, but if it is for you and not *for Christ* that you do it, you do nothing more than make obnoxious noise. And some of you have been boasting that you are great because you speak prophecies, or you believe you can understand the mysteries of the universe, or are wiser and more intelligent than all the rest of us, and some of you are even faithful and loyal to the church and the work of the church, but unless you use these things and do these things to build up each other, your actions serve no purpose in God's eyes. Now some of you are wealthy and give all your material goods to others, and others of you might even give all your time and energy to the work of the church or to serving others, but if it is not for the sake of Christ, there is no point in it at all.

For you see, when we are confronted with people we find irritating, we treat them with the utmost patience and kindness anyway for they are part of our own body. When we are confronted by others who don't see things our way or refuse to do what we want, we try to understand with all our might what it is that *we* need to learn from this so that we can become a stronger body of Christ. When we are living in Christ, when we take the name of Christ, we are truly glad for others in their circumstances, not jealous of them; when we are in a position of power or influence, we don't flaunt what we have but are generous and use what we have to help others; we graciously consider the way others might feel about the things we say or do, and out of consideration for them, we refrain from doing what might hurt them. When we live as Christ lives, we are not content to talk about others behind their backs or to gossip, or to make plans to hurt others, but instead, we try to right our wrongs and the wrongs of our time; we seek God's truth and God's way for us and for others. When we live as Christ would have us, we take what we're given without complaining and we find a way of hope in it, we are gracious even in the face of wrongs done to us, we believe that Christ's way will prevail and we will triumph with Christ when we all work together for one another and for Christ.

All the things of this world which you hold so dear—your money, your power and authority, your ability, your leadership, your knowledge, your work, your life—all these things will come to an end, for what we have now is only a retainer, a placeholder. For the things of this world are *only a part* of what we will inherit in Christ. As creatures of this world, we can know *only a part* of our inheritance. So, my friends, it's time to grow up. Let us put away all the selfishness, the condescension, the one-upping, the quarrels and childishness. For God knows us completely, knows our hearts, our minds, our motives, our desires. And soon, when we inherit the kingdom with Christ, we will finally be complete and will finally know ourselves and one another as God knows and understands us. So in the meantime, we continue to have faith in God, we hope for the coming of Christ, but through it all, we strive to do *everything* in the *love of God*.

No small order Paul has put before them. In fact, what Paul has done is to show them a more excellent way, the way of Christ. But as you and I know, those things he's asking are very, very difficult. This is a far more *difficult* way, and perhaps *that* is why we have such a hard time living out our Christian calling. Love as Christ loves is a *far more* difficult way. It is the way of the cross, the way of self-giving, the way of self-sacrifice, the way of God. For Christ calls us to live for *God* and God alone.

God's way is a way of *giving* to us and trusting us to care for the world, to care for the creatures of the world, to care for one another, and yet, we find it difficult to care, even for ourselves. We quarrel with one another to get our own way. We want what others have. We think our way is the best, and perhaps, the only way. We resent others. We boast in our own victories. We step over others and secretly hope they lose. We think of ourselves

and our own needs before we think of our brothers and sisters. We tell someone else when we have a difference with another rather than going to the one with whom we differ. We say mean things, we think mean thoughts, we quit and walk out rather than fighting for the things we know are right. We even quarrel over the ways we worship and seek to get something out of it for ourselves rather than presenting it as an offering to God.

But God's love growing in us asks us instead to do the more difficult thing, the more excellent thing, and when we do, we begin to grow in Christ, to become more mature in our faith. We *bear with one another* when we would rather walk out. We *hold our tongues* when we would rather whisper about the folly of another. We smile with kindness and graciously accept that *this time*, we may need to allow for someone else's opinion or to ponder that there may actually be a different way than the one we have always followed. We consider the ways in which we may need to *change* in order to grow. We seek out *new things* to learn instead of insisting on getting our own way, and rather than seeking the way of comfort for ourselves, we look for ways to serve and help someone else, even someone we would *rather not* help, and to *give up* a part of ourselves in order to build someone else up.

For the love which *God shares* with us is *self-giving love*. God does not insist on getting his own way, but rather allows each of us to make our *own choices*, and yet, God loves us all the more, even when we make mistakes or do the things that cause God pain or hurt one of God's most beloved creatures. For we are all God's creatures, and we are together, Christ's body, one in faith, one in hope, one in the love of Christ Jesus who gave to us his very life.

As we approach the table this morning, on this All Saint's Sunday, I would like to suggest that we ponder the saints of the church who, throughout the ages, have gone before us, sacrificing that we might be able to worship, giving to others so that we might benefit from their sacrifice. As we approach the table this morning, on this Lord's Day morning, I would like to suggest that we ponder the self-sacrificing love of Christ that gave us freedom from that which would bind us to the things of this world, the sin which clings so closely that we scarcely recognize it. As we approach the table this morning, on this Reformation Sunday, I would like to suggest that we ponder our own lives and the self-sacrificing ways we serve Christ, or the ways we might *begin* our own Reformation, to realize the need as Paul suggests, to give of ourselves sacrificially, to walk a *more difficult* way, a *more excellent* way, to make this church a church filled with faith, and hope, and love, but of these three, people will know, they will see in us and in our church, that the greatest of these is love. Amen.