

February 23, 2020

Dealing with Division...the final segment of this sermon series

Shepherd's Grace Church

But Listen now, and I will show you the most excellent way.

If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. ²And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. ³If I give away all my possessions, and if I hand over my body so that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing.

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

⁸ Love never ends. But as for prophecies, they will come to an end; as for tongues, they will cease; as for knowledge, it will come to an end. ⁹For we know only in part, and we prophesy only in part; ¹⁰but when the complete comes, the partial will come to an end. ¹¹When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child; when I became an adult, I put an end to childish ways. ¹²For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known. ¹³And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love. (1Cor. 12: 31a, 13)

This is the final segment in this sermon series. By strategy, this should be and is the segment that guides us to a greater understanding. The only obstacle to this strategy is in my ability to guide us to that which Paul defines as the most excellent way.

I have a few concerns with regard to my ability in this regard. First, this is a very familiar passage. Many of you had this passage read at your wedding. I know I did. Those who did not choose this passage have probably been to a wedding at which the passage was read.

There is nothing wrong with this passage as one shared with couples choosing to begin their lives together. The concern I have is that a wedding may be the only context in which you have heard this passage. When heard in this context only, the message takes on a sort of predictability. We, the congregation expect it to say certain things and it does say those things...but it also says much more. My concern is that as you hear it today, you will let it say more.

You see, scripture is polyvalent! That is a nice fifty cent word for saying that it has many layers. It always speaks the truth and it is always God-breathed but frequently (and I say that because I have never seen an exception but I have not lived into every circumstance that could ever be anticipated!) frequently it speaks to the situation we are

experiencing in the moment of our encounter. Frequently, when we read the same passage again at a later time, it speaks to us in a very different way because we are experiencing very different circumstances. Polyvalence allows God to speak to us through the same words to remind us of very different things because God alone knows our needs and speaks to us with words we can understand in the exact moment we need them.

A number of years ago, I was visiting a patient in the hospital in El Dorado. I happened to run into a classmate of mine who was very distraught that her mother was near death. While she was concerned with her mom's passing, her greatest fear was that she did not know if her mom had ever accepted Jesus Christ as her savior. After speaking with my friend for several minutes, I volunteered to speak with her mother if she thought that would be appropriate. My friend agreed and we entered the room.

I began a conversation with my friend's mother which lasted several days. As we progressed through the preliminaries, I was able to bring up her relationship with Jesus. The woman confessed to me that she was uncertain regarding her relationship with the Lord. She confided that she had committed so many sins in her life that she was certain she could never receive forgiveness much less the promise of eternal life.

I very carefully walked her through three passages from the book of Romans. In chapter 3 we are told that all of us are sinners and all of us are unworthy of God's grace. In chapter 6 we are told that when we commit ourselves to baptism, we die to our old selves and rise out of that death to a new life. In chapter 10, we are informed that if we believe in our hearts and confess with our mouths that Jesus was crucified for us and is our savior, then we will be saved.

As I said, the conversation took several days and great care but eventually, she gained insight into the word all which is emphasized in each of these passages. She came to understand for herself that all included her and that perhaps she too could receive the Grace promised by God. On that final day of my conversation with her, she accepted Jesus as her Lord and Savior and we shared communion together. We agreed to continue our conversation the next morning but when I came in, she was gone.

The context of Romans is not exclusively for salvation, but on that day, it was...at least for this woman who was ready to hear God's promises. I could have shared with my friend's mom in any number of ways and from any number of places in scripture and I believe God would have allowed her to hear in exactly the right way but in that moment, the polyvalence of the words God provided transcended our worldly existence and allowed God's voice to be heard.

My concern as I share this familiar passage with you today is not about the wisdom of the message, but rather of your willingness to hear. As we begin, I pray that you will put aside the past context in which you have heard this passage and engage instead in the present. Let God speak to you in fresh words this morning and let God meet you right where you are! Right here! Right now!

To do that, let's establish that which is right in front of us. For the past several weeks, we have been listening to the Word of God from Paul's first letter to the Corinthians. As

I have reminded you, this letter is probably a compilation of at least two other letters. Scholars suggest that there may be as many as five letters pieced together in what we call Paul's First letter to the Corinthians. Over the years, these letters have been consolidated into a cohesive text that deals with differences and with division. It is written to the Corinthian Church which Paul established and it is written quite pointedly to a group of people which finds itself a multi-cultural congregation in the midst of many different customs and traditions defined by the culture surrounding them.

This group has come, many from these diverse cultures and from the different practices of religion that are also a part of the community in which they reside. In short, they are pagans, they are Greeks, they are Jews, they are slaves all gathered together in one congregation committed to deepening their relationship with Jesus, the Messiah.

Paul addresses their divisions attempting to correct their behavior and as he does, I believe he gives us tools for working in the culture in which we find ourselves today. Here, in Arkansas City, Kansas we are experiencing a dramatic influx of people. They are not coming from the seaports as in Corinth but they are coming and they are providing a dramatic shift in the culture we have come to know and live in.

In addition, people of color are seeking greater voice in our governmental and economic systems. Women are finally becoming represented in numbers approaching the percentage they actually represent in our population.

What I am saying is that we are a diverse population and that statement is no longer made only about our nation, but it is now made about our homes. It is made about where we live. It is made about here! It is made about now!

Additionally, we are experiencing an influx of religious ideas as well. We are seeing people who are Christian and of different denomination. We are seeing people of non-Christian influence.

These new influences on our culture create for us a similar situation as the one the Corinthians experienced and for that reason, Paul's letter is of particular importance to us as we think about dealing with division. As we have seen in the past several weeks, division is not merely along political lines. It is not merely along sexist lines. It is not even along religious lines. The division Paul is discussing is along what some might call fundamental lines.

Paul wants to suggest that we, the people of Christ are being challenged to exist in new environment. We are being asked to set aside our preconceived notions about culture in order to establish or potentially re-establish a relevance that we have long held not as a matter of course but rather as a matter of fact.

In this, there is much we have learned and much more that we can learn from Paul's letter to Corinth. For example, in the first week of our series, we learned that outside influence can help identify inside difficulty.

Remember back in chapter one that Paul identified the source of his concern for the congregation in Corinth. It was a people practicing pagan worship that wrote to Paul

telling him that there was division in among the Corinthian Christians. Some, they said were bragging that they belonged to Paul; some to Appolos; some to Peter. Their message was not so much a criticism as it was a question. Does it matter, they wanted to know which preacher or teacher a Christian learned from.

In thinking our way through this question, we came to the conclusion that the preacher or teacher should not matter to our fundamental understanding of our relationship with Jesus Christ. We discovered that we can be influenced by style in ways that help us pay attention but we should must be influenced by substance with regards to the issues of our faith.

We are not people who believe there is a different Jesus for different situations. We are instead a people who believe in the central premise of our faith and that point is Christ and Christ crucified! Christ our savior is our savior because he took the sins of the world; all of them and bore them upon the cross that we may be worthy of once again standing in the presence of God! On this there can be no division.

In the second week we learned that sexism has no place in the Church. Remember how Paul taught us that men and women were already teaching in the church? Remember how he invited us to recognize the legitimacy of their teaching.

He suggested that understanding culture could be helpful in establishing and gaining acceptance. He suggested that covering heads might be helpful in style but he went on to remind us that cultural norms cannot and must not change Christian substance. Christ and Christ crucified must remain at the center of who we are. On that there can be no division.

The Lord's Supper must be for all because Christ is crucified for all! He did not die just for men. He did not die just for women! There is no longer slave nor free, Jew nor Greek, male nor female. All are one in the grace given by God through Jesus Christ. On this there can be no division...nor should we want any lest we might be excluded!

In the third and fourth weeks of our series we learned that pride and ego can cause division. There is a revelation! Most of us know that these two elements often cause the greatest damage in churches and in organizations of which we are a part.

Paul's admonition was with regard to Spiritual gifts but it could have been about anything that pits one person against another with regards to power. The Corinthians were being prideful regarding who had the greatest gifts. In the church this argument is often expressed. Who has the most money? Since the church needs money, shouldn't those monetary gifts be more important than other gifts?

Those who donate their time argue that without their efforts, the work of the church could not get done. Those who cannot donate time or money can and do offer prayer. Is that not essential to the functioning of the church? We can see how ridiculous these claims are when we look at them as Paul did.

Which parts of the body can function without the others Paul asked? This is the essential element of our conversation. This is the essential element of our entire series.

Who among us can get along without others among us. All of the body is essential to all of the body. Each part is essential to every other part and our arguments about which part is greater is simply superfluous to the reality of our situation. WE NEED ONE ANOTHER!

The Holy Spirit has given us...each of us gifts that are unique to us. The gifts we have may come from someone of different colored skin or from someone of different gender but all gifts are needed. In the body there is no longer slave nor free, Jew or Greek (You can read here Muslim or Catholic or any other religion if you like) nor male or female. All are one in Christ! On this there can be no division!

Our unity is in our frailty. We cannot exist without each other and none of us can exist apart from the reality of the work Jesus did for us on the cross, making us...all of us worthy again to stand in the presence of God unblemished and able to live eternally in His Kingdom. Our reality is ultimately Christ and Christ crucified!

Our divisions though are still our reality. We still look at one another with disdain and disrespect. We still regard our gifts as the greater gifts. We still want to live in a world where we are right. We still say we are willing to "double down" on our ability to do it ourselves.

Paul knew this. He knew we could not or would not put our pride and egos aside unless an alternative was offered. He knew old ways would not work in a new and emerging culture. He knew therefore that he must offer an alternative! In the moment of his realization, he offered THE MOST EXCELLENT WAY!

As we so often hear at weddings, Paul starts off with the notion of speaking in tongues of mortals or angels. From this phrase and the next several, analogies are often drawn to the differences between men and women. The intent is to remind the bride and groom that they do speak from different places and will need to learn to listen carefully to each other if they expect to have a marriage that works. They will need to compromise and make room for one another.

All of this is true, but I want to invite you to a different context for this message. Today, read these verses as if the language really doesn't matter at all. We could be speaking Hebrew or Greek or any other earthly language or we could even be speaking a heavenly language.

By the way, there is no evidence of a heavenly language. It might be that in heaven they do not need words but rather speak via telepathy.

The point is that whatever language is used there will still be deficiencies. People will still want to argue about which person has more power; about which person contributes more to the effort. Paul knows this and wants us to move beyond language. He wants us to move beyond dialogue and move toward action.

Whether we are talking about tongues or prophesy or faith, all of these gifts are useless unless they are gifts brought in love. Just this past week in Bible Study, we read from a passage written by Jonathan Kahn. Kahn suggests that all of our actions in worship

should be carefully considered. As we discussed, we wondered about many of the actions we take in worship. We have many traditions and cultural norms that are simply a part of what we do here every Sunday.

Some of them seem tedious. Why do we do a call to worship? What benefit is gained from it? Why do we have Children's Time or pray before offering? Kahn wants to suggest that these traditions have become tedious because we have stopped explaining why we do them.

Is it tedious to pray before offering if we realize that it is part of God's plan that we do so? If we read the book of Leviticus and realize that before the sacrifice is made, the one making it had to take the animal by the face and look into its eyes before pinning the sins of the congregation on it?

When we make our offering, how much more special might it be if we think about what we are hoping for that offering to do. Does our gift enhance the coming of the Kingdom? Does our gift enhance the work God has called us to do? Does our gift bring the people of God closer together? Or is our gift just another thing we do because we have always done it that way.

Paul wants us to think about a more excellent way. He wants us to recognize that without love, our gestures are meaningless gestures. He also wants us to recognize that it is not just any kind of love he is talking about. In English we only have one word. Love! In Greek, the language Paul writes in to the Corinthians there are three.

In Greek there is Eros, the sexual love between husband and wife. There is Philia, the brotherly love between people who have a relationship and deep personal respect for one another. There is Agape, the love that is unrestricted and boundless. This is the kind of love God has for us and the kind of love Paul wants us to express for others as we deal with division.

This is the word Paul uses as he expresses the Most Excellent Way. Interestingly, the early Church Father Augustine used the word *Chairos* to translate this passage. This word translates in English to charity and charity, in fact, was the word used by the translators of the King James version of the bible.

For generations, the key thought of this passage was the thought of charity, the giving of something to those who are in need and have less. If we lecture in language that is understood or in a foreign language, the words will not be understood if they are not expressed in such a way as to meet a need. We can demonstrate our ability to interpret the word of God or to bring forth that word (prophecy) or even to use the faith we gain from that word to accomplish great things but if we do not have a greater purpose for our actions, they are still pointless.

Charity seems to be an acceptable way of reading the passage with an exception. The word that Paul uses is not Chairos. It is instead Agape, the Greek word which must be translated as unrestricted and boundless love. The difference is real and it is significant. Acts of charity can be understood as acts of kindness to be sure, but the motivation behind those acts still does not get us to the place God intends us to be.

God desires that we move past the mere acts of kindness expressed in our language. Paul tells us that we must transform our lives! We can give food to the hungry and clothing to the naked but unless we do so with an absolute conviction that we need or want nothing in return except the opportunity to do it again, we have nothing to gain.

Charity is visible and expresses a desire to help. Love, unconditional love expresses the motivation behind the action. The motivation to care for others because we can do no less. The motivation to recognize the incredible gift of Christ and Christ crucified as a gift given to us freely and unconditionally and to accept that gift wholly and fully. Love according to Paul is the only possible response to such Amazing Grace!

Charity is an excellent way to care for others but only love invites us to recognize that we have been given life and even eternal life which we do not deserve and our only possible response to that gift which we can never repay is to love and love unconditionally.

We love with patience and kindness. We do not begrudge others their successes. Instead, we celebrate them. We recognize that the things of this world are fleeting and that our disagreements are temporary and inconsequential in the course of the eternal gift of God!

This past week, I read a post in my Facebook feed from a person I consider a good friend. This person is a pastor in the United Methodist Church and as the church deals with the prospect of division, this person finds himself on the side of the conversation opposite many of his friends. In his post, he lists the character traits of three of these friends, all influential in the decision making process the church is going through.

While he disagrees with their conclusions, he lauds their character and reminds others who have been disparaging of them that the character of these men is not to be questioned or besmirched. His point...we can argue and we can disagree but in the end, if we are motivated by love, we will learn to listen and respect the one with whom we have a difference.

Now we see only in part. It is difficult when a disagreement occurs to recognize that we do not have full visibility of a situation. Now we see only in part...then we will see fully. We do not have the wisdom or knowledge to know fully the other person's position on a particular issue. We also cannot know what is right. Instead, we can only hope to listen, to respect the other and remember that the One died for all. The Body is made up of many parts and while we may not like what our head or our heart is telling us, we must listen to them and gain insight.

When we see fully, we will come to know what God desires of us...and that desire is in love! Full and unconditional.

Also this last week, I read another story on facebook. There was a person in the drive thru line at McDonalds. The person was having trouble placing their order and the person behind them was becoming frustrated. The person behind was honking the horn and pounding his hands on the steering wheel. Eventually, the person behind made an inappropriate gesture.

The person ahead finally got the order straight and in fact paid for the food for the person behind. When that person pulled to the window and was informed that the food they ordered had already been paid for, the person did not know how to act. The person honked at the person ahead and offered gestures of gratitude. The person ahead, however did not act out of love. Instead, when that person arrived at the second window to pick up the food, the person picked up both orders and drove off leaving the person behind with nothing.

We can laugh at this story or we can recognize it in the context of what Paul is trying to tell us. Love demands patience and kindness on both sides. But more than that, it demands patience and kindness on our side. For the person who was second in line, it demands that she consider all the person ahead of her might have been going through. It demands that she expect there were reasons for the delay. It demands that she consider the possibility that other factors might have caused his indecisiveness in ordering.

Love, in short demands that we recognize only in part. When the fullness comes, the partial will pass away.

For the person who was ahead of the impatient woman, love demands that he put away childish things. Love demands that he recognize that his actions will solve nothing for the woman or for himself. Her honking and inappropriate gestures will not change because of his immature decision to react to them. Love demands that his only response be an understanding and kind heart! Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things and even endures all things.

If we are to deal effectively with division, we must recognize that we do not know all. We do not have all. Even if we did, we would still not be able to understand all without the love we must and can bring to every situation. Love is the most excellent way and it is irrespective of who we are or what our particular circumstance.

Love never fails! Perhaps as we consider this prescription from the Apostle Paul, we can remember the grace of God given to us as the only motive for our actions. Perhaps we can recognize that the preacher doesn't make the difference in our faith; the person (Slave or Free, Jew or Greek, Woman or Man) doesn't make the difference in our hope. The gifts we have do not make a difference in our hope. The only thing that makes a difference, the only thing that overcomes division is our willingness to love!

To love because we are the Church of God—the entity in this world commissioned to change the world!

To love because we are the church in Christ and Christ crucified—because we remember His Amazing Grace and the incredible gifts given because of His sacrifice alone!

To love because we are the saints—the ones called to set ourselves apart and become the servants of the world!

To love because God is always faithful! Amen!