

### **1 Corinthians 13:1-13: All we need is love?**

As conference staff, I can tell you that this pandemic is bringing out the best and worst in people. At our best, we are stepping up our giving and looking out for the needy, unemployed, and hungry people in our midst. At our worst...well I'll just say that LifeWay- you know them for their Christian book stores- recently published an article that reported that 27% of pastors across evangelical and mainline populations note that conflict in their church is their greatest pressure point right now. Yes, you heard that right: more pastors said that church conflict was where they felt the greatest pressure, more than the financial health of the church or new technology or even addressing the hurt and fear of their parishioners.

I know what you may think of when I say I'll be discussing first Corinthians. You are accustomed to hearing this scripture at weddings. We like to hear about love in the romantic sense, how it inspires us to overcome minor, and sometimes even major, infractions as we commit ourselves to one another in relationship. Certainly, this kind of love is important, but the meaning of Paul's words went deeper. As I reflected on love and communal discord, on finding connection, overcoming perceived wrongs and daring to try again, I knew that any other

scripture wouldn't ring as true. Come what may, it is love that binds us one to another, and therefore, we must be intentional in seeking love, especially now.

In this scriptural moment, there has been unrest in the Corinthian church. Some consider themselves gifted and see their gift as more important than another's. This superiority complex among a few believers has led others to think that they are small and inferior. One thing we need to remember is that Paul's churches were remarkable in the way that they created equality for many people who felt unequal everywhere else in society. In worship of Jesus Christ, the slave could be found next to the wealthy and all were brothers. That was the revolutionary promise of Jesus- everyone was equal and invited, but what they brought was unique to each. They needed the slave as much as the free, the poor just as they need the wealthy, the prophet, the preacher, the pious faithful, the knowledgeable along with the patient, etc. All of those people were key to the revolutionary gospel of Jesus Christ.

Unfortunately, there is an ugly side to Americans especially, and maybe some would say all humans: we are natural rankers and we like to compare. The Hindus had their caste system, in middle England there was Feudalism, in today's society- haves and have nots. In fact, our culture of marketing is built on fear of

inadequacy and our desire to separate ourselves from one another based on our material goods, our jobs and our knowledge. Do you ever see a commercial that takes note of the fact that a natural born leader, who runs a multimillion dollar company needs the plumber or the car mechanic as much as his company needs him? All those external messages that bombard us- how many of them remind us that we are a small part of a large world and it's not our job to know and have everything, but rather to value everybody, trust one another and share our resources?

When you listen to Paul carefully, you hear his admonition of the Corinthian church members. If I speak in the tongues of mortals and angels but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging symbol (a word for our preachers), And if I have prophetic powers, (for our prophesiers) and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, (for our learned) and if I have all faith, so as to move mountains, (for the pious) but do not have love, I am nothing. If I give away all my possessions (for the selfless) and if I hand over my body so that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing.

What Paul is trying so desperately to tell the Corinthians, and us, is that God's love is revealed most fully at the cross. We can boast about our gifts and

abilities all day, but where are we without God? It's God who fills us with these unique talents and send us out into the world, armed with the tools to make the world better. To take those precious abilities and use them for our own betterment over the betterment of the world—it's unconscionable. God didn't give Solomon wisdom to hoard, but to carefully lead. Isn't it possible that God created us as Lincoln logs, or legos, each with our own purpose, to build up a more kind and loving world? Then God gives us the gift of Jesus Christ to show us love, grace, and mercy, a gift that will be sacrificed for our final understanding of how important all of it truly is. How can we assume that one of us is better than another? How can we delude ourselves with righteous indignation about issues when our chief concern must be the love of one another? How can we disagree about things like openings or closings when our chief concern is the safety of our whole?

I think we have forgotten that we are equal in the eyes of God because we've bought into this rhetoric that surrounds us on all sides. Lots of talking heads tell us we're right, no matter what our story may be. They prod at us and stoke our fires of bitterness. That's what the world tells us. Here's what Paul tells us: love believes and hopes. It rejoices in truth, hoping, believing and enduring.

If we lived in community trusting in love instead of ourselves, what would happen? If we believed in our community as a group rather than the individual, what would that look like? If we understood that we must bring our spiritual gifts and desire to work together to the table, what would the church look like? How would it feel to function as a full body of Christ, alive with willing souls and decisions that benefit everyone.

I know the world might lead you to believe you aren't worthy. I know the world wants you to live reactively. But Jesus does not. Jesus is asking you to act in love with one another. It's going to be a challenge. You'll have to bite your tongue. In Paul's words, you'll have to trust that this dim view you see now is not the whole picture.

This love Paul shines a light on is God's love. It's how God takes our flawed, faulty lives and still claims us. It's how God can still love us when we have taken our gift and claimed it as our own, as if **we** manifested it. It's why God will always seek you even when you curse God's very self. It's real love.

So, all we need is love? Really? I say yes. How we speak and act to one another, how we function as a church, how we treat our environment and even how we interact as a nation. Love means "we" over "me". We love because we

were loved first, therefore let us move in this world as a whole body of children, loved and gifted, so that others be feel the comfort of God's love too.