

Holy Racket

The Rev. Geoff Parker to Foreside Community Church - Falmouth, ME

Sunday, February 03, 2019

Scripture: [1 Corinthians 13:1–13](#)

Introduction to the Scripture

I need to say, you're probably going to recognize this text. You may have a flashback to a really uncomfortable rented tuxedo or bridesmaid dress while listening to it.

This week, we're completing a three week journey ^[1] through the 12th and 13th chapters of Paul's letters to the Corinthians, trying to remind them in the midst of a church conflict, that their many gifts and ways of being Christians are all grounded in and totally reliant on God's work in their community. Last week, Susan Gilpin was kind enough to walk us through the metaphor of the body... we may have distinct gifts, but we are one.

Today, Paul continues on with what we might call the "connective tissue" of that body.

Sermon

So, let's just get this out of the way first:

- raise your hand if you had this as reading at your wedding.
- if you've heard it mainly at weddings in the past?

It turns out that the early Christians were really not into the idea of marriage, and they didn't provide us a whole bunch of texts on the topic... so we have taken the apostle Paul's treatise on love for those special moments. But in that move, we have taken this love story and made it fit solely in our homes.

I don't mean to say that there's anything wrong with using this text at a wedding: many of us need reminders of the call of love, of love's patience, love's kindness, love's bearing with one another in romantic love and life. But that is not the only corner of our lives in which we need this sermon.

We do ourselves a disservice when we limit this reading into our family lives, when this letter of Paul is to a whole community. Is a call to a way of life that does not end with a particular set of relations or walls... but calls us to a wider sense of love.

In the midst of conflict in the church at Corinth, Paul writes to them, trying to mediate between ministries, between gifts of the Spirit which seem to be competing with one another, arguing to have particular privilege or place in their lives together as a church. Paul reminds them that it was God who activated all their gifts... that they are all different parts of the one body, distinct, but totally reliant on one another, and on God.

Paul moves to what must be the core of the church's work here: it must be love. Any gift, any skill, absent love, becomes hollow... becomes noise. And, lest they think that this is something like a hallmark card version of love, some sort of "Can't we all get along?" plea, he spells out what love is.

Love is not something to make us feel better, or to spackle over differences in the name of some bland unity... Paul's love is the love we have seen and found in Jesus's life and ministry... Love which isn't interested in its own way, its own betterment, but the betterment of the other. Love expands and surrounds, rather than limiting or excluding. We can often talk about a kind of love that is a self-centering building up of our own sense of want... but this is not Christ-love... which welcomes us into patience, to discovery of each other's gifts, into bearing burdens together even when it is difficult.

That love, Paul insists, must be the center of our lives, our gifts, our activities if we are to be on the Way of Christ.

This is a form of mindfulness (all the rage right now.) The Buddhist monk, Thich Naht Hahn, has a wonderful and oft-quoted reflection on mindfulness, and on doing the dishes... everyone's favorite task! He says, there is a way for me to do the dishes... which is a chore I have to do, a thing I must get past to get to the next task on my to do list, or the next thing that I would much prefer to do... In that way, I am never actually present, never actually here as I work.

Thich lifts up mindfulness as a way of being fully present, aware of the activity of washing the dishes.

But I also want to say there is a way to do the dishes so that I am setting a place for the next beloved guest who will eat at my table. So that the action is filled with the love and welcome of who will eat with me next. I want to say that this is a mindfulness of love, and that's what Paul points to here as a grounding of any spiritual gifts, or any skills, or talents... they must be rooted in the self-giving love of Jesus.

Because you can be a scholar, but if you don't have love... you probably will not be a teacher. You can be a waiter, but if you don't have love, you will never welcome people fully to eat with joy. You can be an insurance adjuster, but if you don't have love... you will never know what it means to make someone whole after a tragedy. You can donate a fortune, but if you do not have love... you will never move beyond charity to partnership with your neighbors. You can be a mystic, or a monastic... but if you do not have love.

I also need to say, in the past week, as the Supreme Court has upheld a ban on the service of transgender folk in our military. We may graduate Cum Laude, and sit upon the highest bench in the land, but if we cannot see the abundance of love, the gifts of service of others, the God-given beauty of others... if our rulings do not have love... there will be no justice in us.

We must set aside our self-interested clanging of cymbals... all the ringing of our own bells, so to speak... and listen for the music of God's love moving in community and connection of the Spirit, turning us from noise, to a symphony.

This church is one of the places we listen for the works and gifts of love, and tune our own gifts to join the song. We hear it in the ways we contribute to our common life and worship, in service, sharing of gifts, in songs and prayers we share here and for the world. We have here a great abundance of gifts... people who are accomplished in all sorts of ways... but, if you really stop to think about it, this Christ form of love is what gives all those gifts actual meaning.

Today, we particularly give thanks for the work and ministry of Christina as our Office Manager and Parish Administrator, and the five years she has already been with this community. Of course, we give thanks for her skills: her ability to manage the multiple threads and complexities of church life, her attention to detail, and her sense of perspective and vision for the big picture of what is most important... Beyond that, though, we give thanks for the ways she does all these things grounded in love of the community. To be grounded in the love of this place, its people, and what God is doing here, changes all those tasks of her work: small and large, essential and by the way, into ministry: expressing God's love and presence of Spirit to those who take the time to see it.

So we do, this day, take time: Christina, thank you for your ministry with us over the last five years, and in all the time to come. Thank you for being one of our gathered saints, discovering, learning, and growing in our work here through God's love and the spiritual practice of loving service.

We take time, and we gather at this table, to be reminded that when we share the simple gifts of life, bread, a cup, our common daily work, and our common worship... there is an opportunity for all these things, **and for us** to be transformed by God's love. A love which we now see only in part, perhaps imperfectly, oh so very human-ly... but shows us a tiny glimpse of that wholeness of Spirit and community we will come to know face to face in the love of God.

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1. Yes, one of the weeks it's snowed... but if you want to listen to the start of it all, there's a [reflection available online!](#) ↩