

“A More Excellent Way”—1 Corinthians 12:31b-13:13

And I will show you a still more 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. And 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. If 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.

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

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. For we know only in part, and we prophesy only in part; but when the complete comes, the partial will come to an end. When 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. For 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. And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love.

I don't get to officiate at too many weddings—after almost thirty-five years of full-time ordained ministry, I've probably averaged less than one a year. So I haven't had too much opportunity to help couples when they get around to the planning of the actual ceremony. And in those few times when we have gotten to that point, the bride often wants to include the reading we've heard this morning from 1 Corinthians 13. Why? Because it's the “luv chapter”! (You have to say it like that—the “luv chapter.”) And I always caution the couple to be careful here, because this “luv chapter” isn't what they think it is.

You see, this chapter isn't about “luv,” but love. And this love about which Paul speaks is more than romantic love, more than friendship, more than neighborliness, indeed, more than sister- and brotherhood. This love of which Paul speaks is known in the Greek as *agape*, which we translate with the one word “love,” but which means so much more. For *agape* is self-sacrificing, self-giving love. It's love that puts others ahead of the self, the love that seeks the good of others rather than the good of the self. *Agape* is the love that gives without expecting any reciprocation or return—it simply gives.

Now, it takes that kind of love to make a marriage work—if one partner is focused only on what he or she wants, if one partner is unconcerned about the

needs and concerns of the other, the marriage won't work; the couple may stay together, but it won't be a happy relationship.

But it takes that kind of love—*agape*, self-sacrificing, self-giving love—to make the Church work. Paul couches his discussion of love as part of his teaching to the Corinthians on the use of their spiritual gifts. Some of the Corinthian Christians had become spiritually arrogant, claiming their gifts were higher and more important than those of others—and that was causing no small bit of dissension and division in the church. Paul's point to the Corinthians was that exercising their spiritual gifts was fine—but they needed to do it in the spirit of self-sacrificing love; for the goal of using their spiritual gifts was not to build themselves up, but to build up one another in Jesus. That, Paul says, is the “more excellent way.”

You and I as the Church of the Lord Jesus in the here-and-now need to be sure we're hearing Paul's message loud and clear. For this call to self-sacrificing, self-giving love—this call to *agape*—applies not just to spiritual gifts, but to everything we do as the Church of the Lord Jesus. In our preaching, in our teaching, in our service to one another, in our working together in ministry, in our business as the Church, we must be sure that we are truly speaking and acting in love. We should never give cause for anyone to walk away from anything the Church does with a spirit of anger or enmity. Yes, we may disagree, and we may not find a resolution to our disagreement—but, as I've said before (and it's not original with me, because I have no original thoughts), we can agree to disagree without being disagreeable.

Instead, we should each walk away from anything we as the Church do asking, “Did I do everything I could to build up my sister or brother in Jesus? Did my words help or hurt? Did my actions make someone stronger, or did they bring someone down?” These are valid questions we have to ask about everything we say and do as the Church if we truly want to live in “a more excellent way.”

But, as I've said so often, we don't have to do this alone—for the One who is the perfect example of self-sacrificing, self-giving love, the perfect example of *agape*, is also the One who not only calls his people to live in this “more excellent way” but who also supplies what we need to do it. The Spirit of Jesus is the Spirit who teaches us that we need to speak and act and live in love with one another. The Spirit of Jesus is the Spirit who guides us as we speak and act and live with one another. And the Spirit of Jesus is the Spirit who convicts us and corrects us when we speak and act and live with one another in selfishness and self-centeredness rather than self-sacrificing, self-giving love. The Spirit of Jesus supplies what we need to live with one another in *agape*—we supply the willingness to live in this “more excellent way.”

We come this morning to the Table of the Lord to experience in a fresh and new way what our Father in heaven has done for us in the life, death, and resurrection of the Son. But what stands before us—the bread and the cup—are not mere symbols of something done long ago. If our spirits are open to the grace God wants to give us today, this sacrament is a powerful way of God’s sharing with us not only what Jesus has done in the ultimate act of self-sacrificing, self-giving love, but also that Spirit who re-molds us, who transforms us, and who empowers us so that, as individuals and together as the Church, we can live in “a more excellent way.” Thanks be to God!