

THE LOVE CHAPTER

A Sermon for the Fourth Sunday after the Epiphany, January 31, 2010

Text: 1 Corinthians 12:31b-13:13

“Love is patient; love is kind.”

In the name of Jesus. Amen.

Let me begin by saying that last Sunday’s sermon covered today’s Gospel reading—you can catch it on the website, www.indylutheran.org, if you missed it. It was necessary to pull today’s reading into last Sunday, because the two readings from Luke are part of one story.

However, since today’s Gospel has been taken care of, that gives me an opportunity to preach on the second reading.

And how could I pass up a chance, anyway, to preach on the Love Chapter?

Thesis: A married couple ought to behave like a congregation!

For example, if you find yourselves having marital difficulties, perhaps one of you could say to the other, “Let’s be more like Bethlehem Lutheran Church!”

Or at least, “Let’s hold ourselves to Paul’s standards for congregational behavior in chapter 13 of 1 Corinthians.”

That’s because this chapter is not about marriage—although it is a fine text for a wedding sermon. It’s about being church.

Paul’s first letter to the church in Corinth, First Corinthians, provides the second readings each year during Sundays between Epiphany and Transfiguration. This year, we just happen to hit 1 Corinthians 13 today. And we all know and love 1 Corinthians 13 because we have heard it at many weddings, and also because it is such a beautiful essay or poem about love.

“Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, but have not charity, I am as a clanging gong or a noisy cymbal,” etc. Paul defines love in this chapter by telling us its attributes (patience, kindness, etc.), its importance (life is pointless without it) and the fact that it never ends. “Faith, hope, and love abide, these three: but the greatest of these is love.”

Last Sunday’s reading from 1 Corinthians was from chapter 12, but you probably can’t remember what it said, even though it was pretty interesting. It was about how a congregation should organize itself

Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it. And God has appointed in the church first apostles, second prophets, third teachers; then deeds of power, then gifts of healing, forms of assistance, forms of leadership, various kinds of tongues.

The whole reading is 1 Corinthians 12:12-31a

At this point, sorry, another excursus. I'll come to the point in a minute.

When it says "1 Corinthians 12:12-31a," that means you should stop before you read the second half of the verse. "Don't read all the way to the end of the verse! We don't want you to read that!"

Wonder why? Is there something hidden in 1 Corinthians 12:31b?

Yes, there is. And it's going to help us understand 1 Corinthians 13!

You see, verse 31b goes like this: "And I will show you a still more excellent way!"

So, Paul tells the Corinthian church how to respect each other's gifts, how to recognize that even though they have different gifts, they are inspired by the same Spirit, how they should help make up each other's deficiencies, how they shouldn't think one person's gift is better than another person's gift, even the gift of preaching, and so on . . . And then he says "And I will show you a still more excellent way!"

Still more excellent way to do what?

Paul is writing to Christians who are having difficulty getting along with each other. In chapter 1 he already complains about their forming parties around various church leaders. He is upset. Our unity, he says, is not in Paul or Apollos. Our unity must be in Christ, who alone was crucified for us. What a shame, if we don't get along.

Chapter 12, he gives practical guidelines to help them envision their unity. Then he shows them "a still more excellent way." To be the one body of Christ.

Thus chapter 13 is the "still more excellent way" to be the body of Christ, the church.

Nothing against the love of a bride and groom, but Paul is talking here about the love you and I all ought to exercise towards one another. And of course that is also a wonderful model for how everyone in the world ought to treat each other. Perhaps Hard Rock Café ought to add a footnote to their slogan "Love All, Serve All" — "See 1 Corinthians 13."

Love is absolutely essential to a congregation's life. If we don't have it, we are nothing. See verses 1-3. And of the three things we have which are eternal, love is the greatest; greater than

faith and hope. Buildings, liturgies, paraments, institutionalized ways of doing things and saying things, these will all pass away—but not love.

What is this supremely important thing, which is so common that each of us has it? Well, Paul talks about it in terms of what it does and what it does not.

Love is patient.

Love is kind.

Love is not envious.

Not boastful.

Not arrogant.

Not rude.

Love does not insist on its own way.

Love is not irritable.

Nor resentful.

Love does not rejoice in wrongdoing.

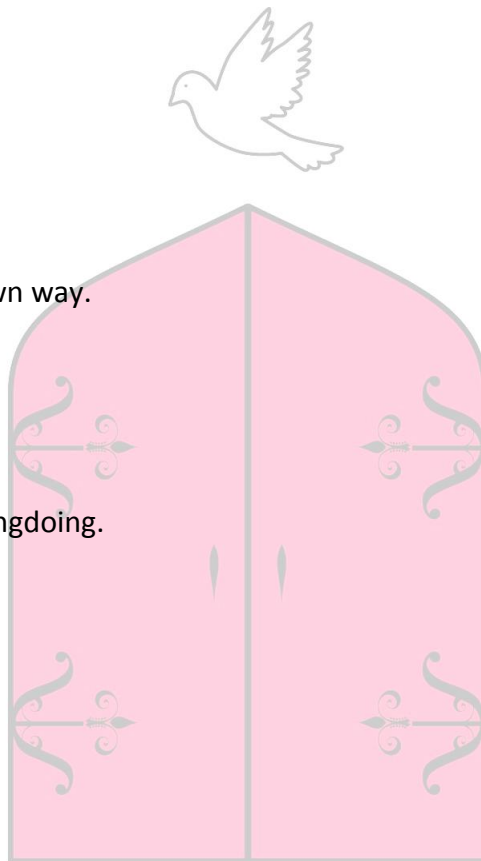
Love rejoices in the truth.

Love bears all things.

Love believes all things.

Love hopes all things.

Love endures all things.



This is a still more excellent way *to live as a congregation* and as a church, than by remembering certain rules Paul laid down about visualizing yourself as a body, or how to take Communion, even.

To which I want to say: “Sure. We’re on it.” Sarcastically. Like, why did he have to include “not irritable”? And what’s wrong with insisting on your own way, when you’re right?

Then you notice: These are not 15 commandments. They are not imperatives. They are in the indicative mood. Love *is* this way. Not, “If you don’t act like this, we’ll revoke your charter.”

As a church we can live in love, we can aspire to love, we can love, because this is the kind of love we know God has shown to us. Even if our parents didn't love us this well, even if our family sometimes falls a little short on one or the other of these, God does not.

And I'm not talking about God as we experience God outside of Jesus Christ. Because in creation, with all its loveliness, we experience not only the awesome beauty but also the unforgiving character of nature, as for example in the drowning of a child. In society we do rejoice at the justice of God when we see it taking place, but that justice also catches us in its sweep often enough, when what goes around comes around.

But in Jesus Christ, true son of the Father, we experience 1 Corinthians 13 *agape* love, in one who loved us even to the point of enduring all things for us and for our salvation. As an example, Jesus doesn't work very well. We can't compete in the pole vault against someone who can fly. But Jesus is more than that—he is the medium of God's own love towards us, offering us mercy in our muddles.

We hear this message about love, and we do not just feel like very bad lovers, we remember that we are beloved. Beloved of God, who so loved the world that he gave his only-begotten Son, so that whoever believed this Word would not perish, which is what happens to people who do not know they are loved, but have eternal life, which is what those people have who know they are loved by God.

Church is a playground, if you will, in which the Gospel is in play, so love is at work, to form and inspire us to be everywhere people who love as they have been loved.

Even in marriage! Amen.

