

Love: The Leavening That Makes All the Difference
1 Corinthians 13:1-13
January 31, 2010

Love is patient, love is kind...it rejoices in the truth. These are beautiful words from Paul. I really enjoy the beauty that is in the Bible, don't you? However, Paul wasn't just trying to communicate beautiful words to the church at Corinth. This was a letter of rebuke. Or to put it more positively, he was trying to instruct them and help them grow as disciples. In the preceding chapter (12), Paul addressed an issue which was plaguing the church. Evidently, various members of the congregation thought *their* particular gift from the Spirit was more important than the gifts of others. Some were even misusing their gifts for their own benefit as they tried to boost their status within the congregation. Pride was running amok. Paul addresses the issue with the familiar image of body parts all working together, and none being more important than the other.

Chapter 13 on *love* follows because Paul recognizes that it is a lack of Christian love that is causing all of the problems in the Corinthian church. In this chapter we find teaching that can be hard for many of us to hear; yet, it is important for us to understand this teaching if we are to grow as followers of Christ. And each of us needs to grow. We cannot remain spiritual babies all of our lives.

The author of Hebrews challenges each of us when he reminds us that we can act like spiritual babies who need milk – not knowing how to do what is right – or, we can eat the solid food of the mature – those who are receiving training to gain the skill in order to be able to recognize the difference between right and wrong...spiritually. (Heb 5:12-14)

Paul challenges us to grow up, spiritually, in 1 Corinthians 13. He recognizes that we all begin life – even our spiritual life – as children. Yet he also knows that we cannot stay that way if we want to grow in Christ and have Christ-centered relationships with those around us.

Let's see what Paul had to say to them, and what the Lord will use this letter to say to us today:

First: *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.*

Let's hear that another way: If I show off my knowledge of spiritual things and even make a show of my spiritual gift of speaking in tongues (though nobody knows what I'm saying), then I am not concerned with helping others learn and grow in their relationship with Christ. Instead,

I'm just a big show-off full of pride. I'm the kind of person who shares my knowledge and faith with others because I want them to look up to *me* and admire *me*.

Maybe I even give a lot of money and time to missions, and I do it in such a way that everyone knows. When I serve in that way, I'm doing it for *me*. If I did it out of love I would probably serve more quietly.

You see, the absence of love distorts our actions. Love causes our motives to be selfless, altruistic and Christ-like. It is the leavening that helps the yoke of Christ to be light, and it helps provide that peace in Christ that passes all understanding.

Second, Paul offers another challenge to us in verse 11.

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.

He uses the images of child and adult to speak of spiritual realities. When Paul speaks about being a child, he's not talking about being child-like in our faith – which is a desired trait. He is referring to childishness in our spiritual life. A childish spiritual life is based in defensiveness and is characterized by immaturity and fear. A childish or immature Christian is self-centered, creates drama in the Body of Christ, holds grudges and prefers to speak their mind.

Compare that with one who is maturing in their faith and has come to understand how the love that Christ has for them is meant to transform their other relationships. A spiritual adult is humble, has a servant's heart, seeks to reconcile broken relationships instead of perpetuating drama, offers forgiveness instead of nurturing a grudge, and understands the scripture that teaches:

You must all be quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to get angry. (James 1:19)

I think Paul's ultimate question to us is this: Have we allowed the love of Christ to become the love in us? Have we allowed the Holy Spirit to transform us from children to adults? Are you more childish or mature in your relationship with Christ and with those around you?

Just think how wonderful Christ's church would be – not mention the world – if we would just allow love to permeate our every word and action. Listen again to these words and imagine:

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.

My prayer for each of us at Sunrise is that we would invite the Holy Spirit to grow us into spiritual adults...to the glory of God...for the transformation of the world.