

Better Together: The Excellent Way

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1 Corinthians 12:3b – 13:1-13

We are continuing our series “Better Together” – how we’re connected together. You’ll hear our Scripture today and then we’ll continue with that series as we focus on the 13th chapter of 1 Corinthians.

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. 1 Corinthians 12:31b – 13:1-13

Let’s pray together. *Gracious God open us up today. Open our eyes that we might see and our ears that we might hear. Open our hearts, God, that we might feel and then O God, open our hands that we might serve. Amen.*

We've been talking about conflict in our world, the world around us and around the nation. We have different political parties. Mr. Whitmore, you don't have any conflict in Britain at all do you? I didn't think so. I thought it was all perfectly aligned there as well.

But thank goodness at your workplace you have no conflict, right? At your workplace I'm sure everyone is perfectly aligned, everyone agrees with whatever everyone does, and you don't have to face any conflict.

Well, I bet none of you have that workplace. But at least at church you don't ever have to deal with any conflict, right? I'm sure that all churches get along and I'm sure that's why there are 34,000 different Christian denominations that grew out of some conflict in some way. But at least at home you don't have to deal with it.

I think if you live alone that you deal with conflict at home. It is all around us.

Now let me tell you that I am well accomplished at conflict avoidance. I'm one of the best – I'm the king of it. But even with all of my great avoidance skills I can't seem to always avoid conflict. It shall always be with us. The question is how do we address it? How do we deal with it? The problem is not that we don't have different opinions. The problem is how do we deal with those. How we address those.

Paul has been, for twelve chapters in the book of I Corinthians, telling the Corinthians what a mess their church has become because of all their fussing and fighting. They're organizing around parties about who their teacher is. It's like different Sunday School classes organized and being divided based on who the teacher is. They're divided over theology, or over rich and poor or over who has the greater spiritual gift. They're divided over everything and Paul has been chastising and admonishing them for twelve chapters. As he reaches the end of the 12th chapter, there's a change. He moves from admonishing them to providing the alternative, the solution. He says, "And I will show you a still more excellent way."

Then he begins with this chapter which I suspect almost all of you know, and it's probably the most well-known Scriptural passage except for maybe the Lord's Prayer. We hear it read at weddings and I think that's appropriate, though I really don't think it works there. But it's so much broader than that. It is really how we're to live together. It's the solution, the approach that we're to take.

Jacob Breeze was on our staff. He went off to do divinity school and graduate school and is now a pastor in the East End. I heard him preach a sermon and a little part of that has always sort of stuck with me. He said, “You know too often we try to have the thing without the thing that makes the thing the thing.”

Here’s an example: Decaffeinated coffee. After all, caffeine is what makes it coffee. Why do you want decaffeinated coffee? You’re trying to get the thing without the thing that makes the thing the thing. Or like alcohol-free beer. That’s not beer. That’s the thing without the thing that makes the thing the thing.

So, Paul says, “If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels and have not love, I’m a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal.” If I’m able to preach like Peter or Paul and thousands come to fill the church but don’t have love, then it just doesn’t matter. If you are incredibly successful in reaching out to the community around you and you change the world, but if you don’t have love, then it doesn’t really matter. Because love is the thing that makes Christianity Christianity. Love is the thing that makes the thing the thing. It’s the essence, the core, the heart of the Christian faith.

Some of you were able to be here for the memorial service for Dr. James Moore. Jim Moore was my predecessor here and left here 13 years ago and he passed away a few months ago. And one of the reasons I think St. Luke’s is what it is, is the amazing love he brought to the experience here, and you can feel it in this place.

At his service I had the privilege of sharing just a bit. One of the things I did was read this passage from John Ortberg. He’s the pastor of Menlo Church at Menlo Park, California. He’s always so clever. Here’s what he says: “The writers of Scripture talk about the purpose of life but of course it’s complex and subtle and pretty obscure. I’ll read a number of statements from the Bible, however the Bible is an ancient and difficult to understand document. So, I’m not really optimistic this will clarify anything for anybody, but I’ll give it a shot.

Someone asked Jesus once how to live a good life and his response was to ‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind and love your neighbor as yourself.’ When he was telling his disciples how to live, he put it like this: ‘A new command I give. Love one another.’ When he told them how they would be recognized as his followers, what their signature characteristic would be, he put it like this, ‘By this everyone will know you are my disciples if you love one another.’

One of his disciples was named John and John later wrote on this: ‘Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God.’ And because John recognized this as a subtle and hard to understand point, he said it backwards: ‘Whoever does not love does not know God because ...’ And then in a profound and unprecedented idea he said, “Because God is love.’ Another disciple was Peter and apparently Peter saw things very differently than John because Peter wrote: ‘Above all love each other deeply because love covers over a multitude of sins.’

On the other hand, you might know a man named Paul, the apostle Paul who became a follower of Jesus after the resurrection. And some time after all the other disciples, and apparently, he didn’t get the memo. He would write things like, ‘Make love your aim.’ Or ‘The goal of our instruction is love.’ Or ‘Now these three remain, faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love.’”

When you’re able to take a look at the overriding theme of Scripture it’s that God is love, that’s the core of our faith. Now the hard thing is how to know what love is. You know it’s love but what does it look like. How do you define love?

I’ve been trying to find a way to define love; it’s certainly more than an emotion. You use word like *affection* and that seems so weak. The truth is that Paul didn’t define it either, so all he could do is describe it. Some things you can’t define, you can only do your best to describe them. It’s like a human being – how do we define John, or Mary, or Sam? You can’t define them, all you can do is describe them.

That’s what he does. “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’s not irritable, or resentful. It does not rejoice in wrongdoing but rejoices in the truth.”

Have you ever seen those sketch artists or forensic artists where in a criminal case they draw a picture of a possible suspect? What if you were just to describe love to a sketch artist? “Make sure those eyes are kind eyes. Make sure the ears are patient ears. And take off that arrogant and rude hat. That wasn’t on there. And make sure you put a strong chin.” See, love rejoices in the truth and lives out of convictions.

If the artist drew that, then it would look just like the face of Jesus. Because Jesus is the human embodiment of love. That’s who Jesus is – it’s to show us what love really looks like, so we describe it.

Then he goes on to talk about what love does to us. I want to skip verses 7 through 10 for just a moment and I'll get back to them. But in verse 11 he says, "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."

What he's saying is that love is transformative, it changes you. He uses the image of growing up. "When I was a child, I was this way. Now I've become this way. I've given up childish ways. No more temper tantrums, no more insisting on my own way. This is the end of my growth and it's to become completely loving."

The part that sticks out mostly to me in this is when he says twice in this whole chapter, "Now we know only in part but then we will know fully even as we are fully known." The essence there is that we have to realize that there are things we don't know yet.

Our bishop has a great phrase that I love. In issues where we disagree with each other, he says we need "to approach with convicted humility." We have convictions and we hold fast to those, but we recognize we may be wrong. That's because we only know in part. So what we need to be able to do is to approach people with that sense of convicted humility.

Tim Stevens is a consultant with Vanderbloemen Research Group, and he has worked with our staff on some staff organization things. He has a marvelous little book called *Marked by Love*. In the book he writes this: "One of the blessings of youth is having everything figured out. Or at least believing you do. Freshmen college students can be the worst because they come home after a semester and have answers for everything. Until life happens, that is. And their perfectly crafted arguments begin to unravel. I've spent thirty plus years as an adult watching my own perfectly crafted arguments fall apart, one by one. I used to see certainty as obtainable and as a sign of maturity but now I'm not so sure. The older I get and the more I study and experience life the less I am actually sure about. And I am becoming comfortable with a lack of certainty."

To be able to say, "I don't really know" or "I think I know but I may be wrong." I have a friend who says that the opposite of faith is not doubt but the opposite of faith is certainty - if you're certain you don't have to step forward on faith. Faith means "I don't know for sure but I'm moving forward."

I gave you the phrase “the thing that makes the thing the thing....” Well, I’ve got another one for you. It goes this way: “I don’t know what I don’t know but I know that I don’t know.” I know that when I get to heaven there’s going to be a lot of stuff where I’ll say, “Oh, man, I missed out on that.” Or “I was wrong on that one.”

To live out of that place of convicted humility and to let God grow you. That’s part of what love is.

Then going back to verse seven Paul says, “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.” Then in verse 13 he says, “And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love.”

Love is the last thing standing. When I talk to people who are reaching the end of their lives maybe from a terminal illness and they recognize that their days are fewer and fewer. What they tell me is the things that they used to think are so important just aren’t all that important anymore. But the things that are most important are the people around them, the people they love, and the people who love them back. And so they draw that circle closer. They want to spend their time loving. Love is the last thing standing. Everything else will go away.

I mentioned John Ortberg earlier. His wife is really the smarter of the two of them. Nancy Ortberg has written a number of books and she writes this: “There is something that happens when you get to the essence or the internal center of something. You find its intrinsic nature which is the indispensable quality of something that determines its character. What Paul is saying in so many words is that at the center of who God is, is not God’s holiness. At the center of who God is is not God’s omnipotence, or omniscience. At the center, at the core of who God is is God’s love. And everything else emanates from that. When you strip away what is not essential from anything and you dig deep enough to find out what is irreducible in the universe and in the nature of God, it is love.”

When you take your life and you put it in the refiner’s fire, and it burns off everything else that doesn’t matter, and you take it back out again, what’s left is love.

The cross is the perfect expression of love. See, love isn't easy. It might be a simple concept for us to take hold of – that love is the most important thing. But it's not easy. The cross certainly wasn't easy, but it's the perfect expression of God's love for us.

There is in Union County, Illinois a cross there that's 111 feet tall. It's called Bald Knob Cross and it is on a little hill and the hill is cleared at the top. It's all surrounded by these deciduous trees and this 111-foot cross is there and you can see it, I'm told, for 7500 square miles around it. Anywhere if you're in the neighborhood you can see that cross up on the hill.

In the winter there, all those deciduous trees that are in the forest around it lose their leaves and just look like sticks. From a distance you just see these sticks. And when it snows it looks like a nuclear winter. It's this white but looks like it could be ash and just these sticks sticking up out of it. But on the top is that cross. It's the last thing that will be standing.

At the end of my life when I see Jesus face to face – whatever that looks like – I have no idea, but what I do know is it will be pure unbounded love. And at the end of history, when there's nothing left, when earth and heaven are joined yet again, all that will be there will be love. That's all that will be left – the last thing standing. Faith and hope – we can look forward to that day. But until then let's practice the more excellent way and love each other.

Gracious God, we can't all think alike but surely, we can all love alike. We can love each other. We can care about and treat one another with love even when we disagree. We can face our conflicts head on and not avoid them, full of love. We can have convicted humility as a way of loving. We can let love grow us into who you want us to be - that visage of Jesus himself. Teach us how to love. In the name of Christ we pray. Amen.