

“A More Excellent Way”

Isaiah 1:4-10; I Corinthians 13:1-13; Luke 6:27-38

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Who's the best? Anybody tired of that yet? I could try and see if I could make that a record and keep going.....I think somebody else was tired of that same question. I think Paul was tired of that question. I think he was tired of the Corinthians asking that question over and over again. We've talked over the last few weeks about that question and how Paul was addressing it. First of all let's remember he was addressing it to people who could say Jesus is Lord. Notice also that he was addressing this question by including what it means to have spiritual gifts, to be people who know the spirit is present and among them, can be assured they have gifts. He told them it's not about how good you are because of those gifts but how you can use them for the good of the body. He goes on then to say, not only is it about how you can use them for the good of the body, but actually God gives us all the variety of gifts - that we're not supposed to look down on any of those gifts - because all that variety fit together and work together like a body - the very image he uses. To be a body. And then at the very end of chapter 12 he goes on to say there is still a more excellent way.

What's his question? He's really telling the Corinthians to ask a different question, not who's the best, but what's the most excellent way to follow your Lord? The still more excellent way. Now some of you may have heard this passage for the first time or the thousandth time. It's a passage that is often used. We often think of it as Paul's "ode to love", as an eloquent passage to love. And that it is. I think it's something else as well.

It's a challenge. It's a challenge to the Corinthians to think what it really means, to really follow Christ. What's the way to live as those who follow him? The still more excellent way! And so Paul suggests he could have all the gifts - if I had the ability to speak in the tongues of mortals or angels but have not love; I have faith so as to move mountains but have not love; if I had all knowledge and knew all mysteries but have not love - again and again he says "but have not love". What does that mean? Have love. He seems to be suggesting that love is something we can choose to have, almost like a possession, something that becomes part of who we are, something we can choose to have.

It's interesting because the very word in Greek - this particular word in Greek means *to choose*, to care for another because they are valued. He's reminding the Corinthians - and perhaps us as well - that we're called to have love as we follow Christ because we know God's love in our lives.

In God's gift of his son to us, we know God's love and then recognize the immense value of God. Hopefully. Indeed, in Christ we see the wonder of who God is. And I believe we see the immensity of who God is. Not only did God create everything, God gives us life. And in knowing Christ then we're called not only to love God, to recognize the value of God, but to recognize the value of God's people - all God's children, to have love.

Now we can have a lot of things. I can have a TV and put it in the closet and “have it”. But is that where Paul leaves this? Do we just “have” love? How does he describe what love is? Is it just a possession? Paul goes on to say love is patient, love is kind. Those are actions. When we have love - when it becomes part of our character - it’s seen, it acts, it’s dynamic, it works. It’s patient. It’s kind. Love is not envious or arrogant or boastful or rude. Those are active things. Things we do. Love does not demand its own way. Love is not irritable. He goes on talking about things we do, the ways we act. It’s wonderful to think about - the way that love is. But the challenge is to recognize it’s something I’m to have; we’re to have. Perhaps you can read those words without any challenge, though I’d be surprised if many of us can. When we meet someone who really lives that way, we recognize a saint, don’t we? The love that Christ calls us to is active and doing. And, then, it bears all things, believes, trusts all things. Hopes - has that attitude towards the future that there’s going to be something positive coming, hopes all things. And even when all those things are a struggle, endures all things. Love never ends Paul says. Why does love never end? I believe love never ends because that’s what God made us to be, the kind of people God made us to be, the way God made the world to work, and it never ends. We’re always invited in to the way God created us to be, the world to be.

Paul challenges us as the body of Christ to share that, to be that, to be those who exhibit love and perhaps we can say that it’s wonderful to share that together. And then I hear Jesus words on top of what Paul says and I’m challenged - I think he challenges us - not only do I get to love each of you, all of you who I feel loved by, but what does he say? Love your enemies. Do good to those who persecute you. He extends it beyond the body to everyone. If you’re not challenged yet, I don’t know how to challenge you! We can’t do it of course, on our own. It is by God’s grace, by God’s gift, a recognition that love is simply not a feeling, but something we get to choose to try to do because of God’s grace in our lives. We’re called. If we can say “Jesus is Lord” we are called to this still more excellent way. It’s based in faith and hope, but the essence of the challenge is to love. So Paul concludes, “Faith, Hope and Love, these three, but the greatest of these is love,” Amen.