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First Presbyterian Church, Athens, Georgia
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Text: I Corinthians 12:31 – 13:13

A More Excellent Way

We can hardly hear I Corinthians 13 without hearing wedding bells ring! That passage has got to be the most popular scripture chosen by engaged couples for their nuptials. After all, it's about love. And love has certainly got to be the foundation if a marriage is to last beyond the dewy-eyed stage into the I-can't-believe-he (or she)-leaves-dirty-socks-on-the-floor, squeezes-the-toothpaste-the-wrong-way, and voted-for-that-lunatic stage and beyond. Yes, *omnia vincit amor*, love conquers all. I once asked a wife at her fiftieth wedding anniversary party the secret to such a long marriage. Without missing a beat she looked straight at me and said, "Honey, you learn to overlook a lot." Maybe that is the essence of love—overlooking a lot. Paul says as much, "Love is patient; it is not irritable or resentful; it bears all things; endures all things." And I suppose that includes annoying habits and divergent political views.

But despite I Corinthians 13's popularity at weddings Paul did not write this passage as a wedding homily. He did not have in mind brides in lace and nervous grooms. So, as good biblical scholars, we better pick the rice out of our ears and wipe the white icing off the pages of I Corinthians 13. We better look at its context, and think about Paul's original audience, and ask why did Paul say what he said and, then, what it might mean for us.

I Corinthians 13 is 13 chapters into a 16 chapter letter written to the church in Corinth. Corinth was about 40 miles south-southwest of Athens, Greece, which would be about where Godfrey, Georgia, down in Morgan County is in relation to us. Only Corinth, unlike Godfrey, was located on the coast and was a bustling commercial center. In 50 A.D. Paul arrived in Corinth and preached the gospel with such power that a community of believers formed. The church was a cross section of the economic and religious makeup of the city—indeed, of much of the Greco-Roman world. There were a few wealthy people, while most were poor, with no middle class as we know it. Paul stayed with the congregation for a year and a half before moving on. The letter we call I Corinthians he wrote about a year and a half after that. It is a response to a number of issues within the congregation which were dividing their ranks. If you read Paul's entire letter you will see that there was envy and strife,ⁱ boasting,ⁱⁱ and rival groups jockeying for control.ⁱⁱⁱ There was disregard for those who were not fully enlightened about appropriate Christian conduct^{iv} and the marginalizing of the poorest members of the church.^v We may have romantic notions of peace and harmony in the early church, but clearly it was not so. From the beginning, alas, the church has known conflict.

In the 12th chapter Paul addresses the matter of spiritual gifts—prophecy, miracles, healing, tongues, and so forth. Some members of First Church, Corinth claimed to have special status because they felt their gifts were superior. Paul goes to great lengths to explain that all spiritual gifts that God gives are important in the church. He likens the church to a human body. The eye is not more important than the ear, nor the hand more important than the foot. We all need one another. After applauding all these gifts, he tells them to seek even greater gifts, saying, "And I

will show you a still more excellent way.”

That’s the line that sets up I Corinthians 13: “a still more excellent way.” In the Greek, the word translated “way” is *hodos*. It literally means “path” or “road.” It can also mean “highway,” “street,” or “journey.” The more excellent way is, of course, love. So it turns out that love is not just another gift on the list but a *way*, a manner of life, a pattern of behavior in which all the other gifts can be exercised.

“Way” is a stock metaphor in the Bible. It’s used extensively in both the Old and New Testament. It appears 97 times in the psalms alone, beginning with the first psalm which sets two paths of life before us—a fruitful life grounded in God’s life-giving Torah or an insubstantial life which dries up and blows away.^{vi} Jesus uses the metaphor in the Sermon on Mount: “Enter through the narrow gate; for the gate is wide and the road (*hodos*) is easy that leads to destruction, and there are many who take it. For the gate is narrow and the road (*hodos*) is hard that leads to life, and there are few who find it.”^{vii} And Paul employs the metaphor in his letter: Love is the more excellent way, the best road, the superior path.

That, however, doesn’t mean it’s the smoothest route, the easiest walk, the straightest street. It’s often just the opposite. Like Jesus said, it’s hard. Picture a hike in the mountains. The trail may be twisty. It may be rocky. There might be fallen trees you have to climb over or go around. There may be steep inclines and brambles. The road we call love is not always easy.

There’s a 2010 movie called *The Way*. It’s about a doctor, played by Martin Sheen, whose estranged son was killed in a freak storm while walking an ancient pilgrimage route through Spain called the Camino de Santiago. Camino de Santiago translates as the “Way of St. James,” so named because it ends at the Cathedral of Santiago Compostela, where the Apostle James is said to be buried. The doctor flies to Spain to recover his son’s remains and as a way to honor him decides to walk the pilgrimage himself. Like in the *Canterbury Tales*, he doesn’t walk alone, but takes up with other pilgrims—three in particular. The physical path itself isn’t so strenuous—nothing like Cheryl Strayed hiking the Pacific Coast Trail in *Wild*. But it is hard in other ways. In an interview about the film, Martin Sheen said, “The real pilgrimage begins on the inside, and you begin to let go of all the things you’ve been holding on to in the dungeon of your heart. You begin to let that one go that you couldn’t forgive. You begin to stop being judgmental, and envious, and angry, and selfish, and resentful, and all the dark parts of our spirit begin to be released.”^{viii} That sounds like the way of love to me. And notice, it doesn’t happen in a vacuum but is practiced in the company of fellow pilgrims, that is, the church.

Addressing the Corinthian congregation, Paul describes the way of love. He says love is long-suffering, cares more for others than for self, isn’t “Me first.” There are battle stories from what are called the “Worship Wars.” Those are the fights that erupt over how to conduct worship—what’s appropriate, what glorifies God, and, seemingly most important, what suits *my* aesthetic sensibilities. I interned in a church that had a dance choir. Periodically girls in leotards and flowing skirts spun and leapt around the chancel and waltzed down the aisles. This form of praise and expressive interpretation did not sit well with all the members. I have never forgotten what was written on a congregational survey by what I presumed to be an elderly member (judging by the handwriting): “I do not like the dance choir. But if it speaks to the young people, dance on!” To quote Frank Sinatra, “That’s amore!” (or, rather, agape).

The more excellent way of love can be quite difficult. Paul says it is not provoked and doesn’t keep score of the sins of others. He doesn’t use the word, “forgiving” in this passage but it is certainly implied. Forgiveness is not an easy thing. Sometimes just living with a truce is all

we can muster with one another. But getting that far is, I would say, traveling along the way of love. In one church I served there were two florists from competing flower shops. There was bad blood between them. An experience in their past dealings with each other had hurt them each deeply. This I learned from them privately, not through gossip or through their publicly maligning the other. I had grand visions of orchestrating a reconciliation between them. I failed. I never did get them to kiss and makeup. But as I watched them both come Sunday after Sunday and sit just three pews apart and eat Wednesday night suppers, despite the presence of the other, I came to see their exercise of mutual forbearance as an expression of love. After all, neither one quit the church and joined another. They were respectful of the other. They both managed to stay a part of the body even though it had to be difficult.

A more excellent way. That sounds like the title of a book by a professor at the Terry College of Business. But this more excellent way isn't the most efficient or most logical way. The road is seldom the most direct, as the crow flies, but is usually winding and longer. In every loving church I've known, there are members who have been a vital part of the congregation who had handicaps. Some carry obvious burdens like autism, intellectual disability, or physical limitations that require, say, a wheelchair. Yet everyone is embraced and given a place. Everyone's gifts are appreciated.

In one church, we held our breath every time a certain young man carried the offering plates down the aisle. We prayed the money wouldn't launch out of the plates in a shower of embarrassment. He had cerebral palsy. His irregular gate caused him to bob like a ship in a storm. And we had to strain to understand his slurred speech at deacons' meetings. But Bobby was just as important as any of the rest of us and maybe more so because he was a visible reminder that we all belong and we all have handicaps, though most of us are able to keep them pretty hidden most of the time because we spend so much energy keeping them under wraps. Hiking the way of love means accommodating others, slowing down to match their pace, listening to their ramblings, offering to carry their pack for a while. It's group travel which is never the fastest method of getting somewhere. But it is the way of love.

This more excellent way while hard is definitely worth it. Last Thanksgiving we took a family hike on the Black Ridge trail near the Blue Ridge Parkway in SW Virginia. We followed the path down the woods crossing a stream, up beside a meadow, and through the woods for over an hour. Much of the time I looked down at where I was placing my feet—avoiding rocks and roots—when I happened to look up and see the vista that had come into view to my right. We were on the edge of the Rocky Knob Gorge. The gorge is a big chasm between two mountain ridges. Beyond the gorge you could see row after row of undulating slate blue mountains, each fainter than the one before it. It was breathtaking. Such is the way of love, a difficult path that's worth all the toil.

As a church you can have the most beautiful facilities in town, you can have the most magnificent music and the most theologically educated congregation, but if you don't have love, it's not worth a hill of beans. By the same token, you can have a falling-down building, a mediocre preacher, and an aging congregation, but if you have love, it's a glimpse of heaven. Paul said, "Love doesn't strut, doesn't have a swelled head, doesn't force itself on others."^{ix} You know, there are some things more important than being honored. There are some things more important than being powerful. There are some things more important than being correct. Some people think they have gained everything by standing on principle, dominating others, or being right, but they have lost it all. In Corinth, some members were so focused on spirituality that they became

guilty of dividing the church and hurting their brothers and sisters. When mutual respect and mutual concern are absent in a church, the rifts grow and can eventually become irreparable. It is heartbreaking. Love doesn't tear apart. Paul says repeatedly to the Corinthians, love builds up.

I know that not everyone in this congregation agrees about everything. There are different points of view about, for example, gay marriage, gun control, Israel and Palestine, the virgin birth, not to mention the firing of Mark Richt. But my observation after being here a year is that people here are willing to dialogue rather than debate. Dialogue has give and take. Debate has winners and losers. People here are willing to listen rather than pontificate. People are willing to trust each other. It takes humility to reserve judgment. It takes knowing that you don't know it all. We see in a mirror dimly. We know only in part.

The more excellent way is not easy but it is the only way worth living. It is the way, after all, embodied most visibly in the compassionate life and sacrificial death of Jesus. Jesus embodied the way of love. He even said, "I am the way."^x So follow him. Follow his way of love. Follow him through the ups and downs of congregational life. Hang in and follow him when it is tempting to quit. Follow him together even when it's slow, and tedious, and uphill, and means putting up with others with kindness and laying aside your cherished agendas so that together you can seek God's agenda. Follow the more excellent way of love. In the end, it's what outlasts everything else and matters the most. Amen.

ⁱ I Cor. 3:3

ⁱⁱ I Cor. 4:7,5:6

ⁱⁱⁱ I Cor. 1:10-17

^{iv} I Cor. 8:1 – 11:1

^v I Cor. 11:17-34, 12:20-26

^{vi} Eugene Peterson, *The Jesus Way* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2007), p. 23.

^{vii} Matthew 7:14

^{viii} <http://www1.cbn.com/movies/emilio-estevez-and-martin-sheen-faith-the-way> on 1/25/16

^{ix} Translation by Eugene Peterson in *The Message*.

^x John 14:6