

# "The Most Excellent Way"

**February 12, 2012**

**Pastor Rich Knight**

**Trinitarian Congregational Church**

**I Corinthians 13**

We're studying the great love chapters in the Bible this month. Our passage today is one of the most beloved in all the Bible - I Cor. 13. It's read at most weddings, but it wasn't written to a couple in the ancient city of Corinth. It was written to the church of Corinth. In fact the context is clear - the previous chapter and the chapter to follow are all about life within the church. So what St. Paul has in mind is not how a couple ought to act towards one another, but rather how we are to act toward one another. One other thing to note - some of the commentaries question if St. Paul really wrote this passage. They wonder if he is perhaps quoting a famous poem or song here - because the writing is so good and different from much of his writing. I feel bad for him if he actually did write it. He writes a masterpiece and some scholars say, "He must have been quoting someone else." Poor guy. Let's take a look.

**I Corinthians 13**

*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.*

## **A. The Opening Section**

The words just roll off our lips - *"If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love I might as well just be playing the cymbals or striking a gong."* Love is more important than eloquence. That makes sense.

*"If I understand all mysteries and have all knowledge . . . but don't have love, I am nothing. If I have so much faith that I can say to a mountain move and it moves - if I can do all that but still don't have love, I'm nothing."*

Love is more important than eloquence, more important than knowledge, more important than faith. These are remarkable statements from the Apostle Paul (whether he wrote them or just included them). These are startling statements from Paul - Why? Because he is the greatest theologian the church has ever had. He's the one who championed the cause that we are saved by faith, not works. He's the one who explained with eloquence the great mysteries of our faith - about Old Testament Law

vs New Testament Grace. And now he's saying, Love is more important than understanding all the doctrines and mysteries of our faith.

Imagine you're really into science and years ago you would have had the chance to hear Albert Einstein speak. And Einstein enters the lecture hall and says: "I like to talk to you about something much more important than science. I'd like to talk with you about love." Or imagine you went to a music hall to hear Itzhak Perlman, and he comes on stage and says, "Instead of playing the violin, I'd like to speak to you about the most important subject in the world - love." That's how shocking it is that Paul says love is more important than faith, more important than knowledge, more important than anything. That's not to say of course that faith is not important or that knowledge is not important.

But what Paul wisely points out is that religion without love is a dangerous thing. Hasn't history taught that? From the Inquisition to the Witch Trials - *religion without love is a dangerous thing*.

A number of years ago when I was living in Pennsylvania I received an invitation to speak at a Mennonite High School (These were modern Mennonites, not the ones in horse & buggies). I almost turned down the invitation because of something that happened during the Reformation of the 16th Century. Some of the Reformers in our faith tradition were upset that the Mennonites were rebaptizing some of their members. The Mennonites baptized back then by immersing folks in a river or lake. So these Reformers who were upset at the Mennonites did something horrific. They took the Mennonites out into the river and they drown them in the river - all because they believed the Mennonites has an incorrect doctrine of baptism.

*"If I understand all mysteries and have all knowledge . . . but don't have love, I am nothing."* Religion without love is a very dangerous thing.

Sometimes we too can be a little dangerous with our religion, too, even

when we're trying to be helpful. Imagine if your struggling with depression and you shared that with me and I said to you - "I find I don't have these struggles because of my faith in God." Wouldn't that be discouraging and even a bit shaming? Why don't you have as much faith as me? Wouldn't that also be long on faith and short on love?

There's always a temptation to do this when we help people. We can subtly shame them for going through tough times, for struggling financially or for being poor. "If I give away all my possessions (to help people)" wrote Paul, "but don't do it in love I've accomplished nothing."

## **B. The Middle Section**

The next section of this great chapter really fleshes out what Paul means by love. Notice he never defines love. The Bible never defines love, except to say that God is love. Instead Paul describes love.

*Love is patient. Love is kind.*

*It isn't envious or boastful or arrogant or rude.*

*Love doesn't insist on its own way.*

*It doesn't rejoice in wrongdoing.*

*It rejoices in what's right.*

*It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.*

*Love just keeps on loving.*

*It never stops.*

This is part of the greatness of the passage. He doesn't allow us to sentimentalize love. He doesn't allow us to slip into pious platitudes that mean next to nothing. There's an earthiness about it all. Patience. Kindness. Rudeness. Arrogance. Endurance. We all know what these things are. And this is where the rubber meets the road, isn't it? We'll come back to that in a minute.

**C. The final section** is often skipped at weddings. I used to skip it as well. I now see it as hugely important, for it deals with the subject of - maturity and immaturity. *"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."* Is there anything more important for relationships than putting an end to childish ways? Immaturity is one of the biggest reasons for divorce. You often hear people express this - "We were too young, too immature." Because Immaturity brings selfishness, pettiness, keeping score, insecurity, controlling behavior, overly jealous - all of which erode the foundation of the marriage

Stanley Hauerwas is a professor of Christian ethics at Duke. When Hauerwas was a student at Yale Divinity School, his father, a Texas bricklayer, was building, from scratch, a deer rifle-"boring the barrel, setting the sight, hand-carving the stock." During summer vacation, when Hauerwas was home, his father showed him the beautiful rifle. Hauerwas didn't realize that it was a gift, that his father was making the rifle for him, his son. He reflects, "Flushed with theories about the importance of truthfulness and the irrationality of our society's gun policy I said, 'Of course, you realize that it will not be long before we as a society are going to have to take all these things away from you people.'" It was, Hauerwas said, "one of the lowest points of my moral development. . . . I was simply not morally mature enough to know how to respond properly when a gracious gift was being made."

To truly love folks we have to put aside childish ways and be able to see what life looks like from behind other peoples' eyeballs and not just our own - for we see in part.

I mentioned in the newsletter that I did a funeral last year where the family asked for this passage to be read at the funeral for their mother. "This is what she was all about," they said. We should all be so lucky as to have our loved ones request this passage at our funeral. We should all be so lucky. We should all be so loving.

## D. Closing

The best way I know of to apply this incredible passage to our lives is to insert each of our names into the text wherever you see the word love. When I do it it comes out like this:

*Rich is patient. Rich is kind. Rich is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude.*

*Rich does not insist on his own way. Rich is not irritable (if he's had enough sleep).*

*Rich is not resentful. Rich rejoices in the truth.*

*He bears all things, believes all things, endures all things. Rich keeps on loving and loving.*

If we can do that without laughing or saying, "Oh that's ironic!" I suspect we're on the right track.

I invite you to try it now. Just insert your name in the blanks. Slowly. Reflectively.

\_\_\_\_\_ *is patient. \_\_\_\_\_ is kind.*

\_\_\_\_\_ *is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude.*

\_\_\_\_\_ *does not insist on his own way. \_\_\_\_\_ is not irritable.*

\_\_\_\_\_ *is not resentful. \_\_\_\_\_ rejoices in the truth.*

\_\_\_\_\_ *bears all things, believes all things, endures all things.*

\_\_\_\_\_ *keeps on loving and loving."*

Let's close in prayer.

Loving God, this passage is so clear. Help us to live it out this week and always. Amen.