

“The Gift of Love” – Stephanie Wing, 1.31.10

This famous passage from 1 Corinthians is a favorite for weddings. It waxes poetic about love for thirteen verses, and doesn't mention God once. There is little in here that will be offensive or objectionable. In short, it is a tame crowd-pleaser that won't raise any tough questions or challenges. Or is it?

It is really a shame that this chapter gets separated so easily from its context in Paul's letter to the Corinthians. But to understand the force and the message behind it, we have to look at where it falls, near the climax of a letter written to a church experiencing very deep and destructive divisions in the body of Christ.

Though it is often difficult for us to fully appreciate the context of the Biblical world, there is probably no book more relevant to our modern context than this letter to the church in Corinth. Corinth had been a city of wealth, power, and high culture – a jewel in the crown of the Greek Empire. Back in its heyday, Corinth was a bustling, very diverse city. Most cities of the Greek and Roman empires had specific gods and religious practices associated with the city, but Corinth had just about every religious sect, belief, and practice represented, including Christianity. There had been some conversion among the Jews in the 40s, but Paul's stay in Corinth really established the Christian church there, working first with the Jews and then reaching out to the Gentiles. He was there for 18 months, and then went to Ephesus, where he stayed for a little over 2 years.

While in Ephesus, problems in Corinth came to his attention. Among their problems, the chief problem is that the Christians are dividing into factions and arguing about what it means to be a Christian.

It is to this context that Paul writes. Christians are disagreeing with each other right and left, developing factions and arguing over who is more spiritual. They point to themselves rather than pointing to Christ, and they are more influenced by their culture than they are by their faith in Jesus Christ. Is this starting to sound at all like our world today?

Our readings from the last couple of weeks addressed the question of which gifts were prioritized, which members received special treatment, and how all members of the body of Christ are essential. Last week's reading ended with the verse, "But strive for the greater gifts. And I will show you a still more excellent way." That is the big lead-in that 1 Corinthians 13 gets from Paul, and we cut it right out! This whole chapter on the nature of love is not some lofty, poetic essay on a philosophic or spiritual ideal; it is a concrete, in this world, hard work required solution to the problems of division in the church. Offices and libraries could be filled with books that have been written on church conflict – the causes, the diagnoses, the symptoms, and much more. But nothing comes close to prescribing a solution as simple and powerful, and downright difficult as this letter to the early church.

We know that we are called to show Christ's love to all the earth. When we see images like those that have come out of Haiti in the past few weeks, our hearts go out to our brothers and sisters in Christ. We want to reach out with God's love in whatever ways we can. In times like these, we hear of amazing stories of Christians reaching out in love to help those in need.

I have been captivated by the story of two young sisters, Jamie and Ali McMutrie. These two young women, just 22 and 30 years old, have given the last few years of their life in mission to run an orphanage in Haiti. They first encountered the needs of that country in mission trips with their church, and after many missions to Haiti, first Jamie, and then Ali, moved to Haiti permanently. They receive no salary, eat what the children eat, and give all of their energy and love caring for these children in need, working to connect them with adoptive families, and changing all of their lives in the process.

After the earthquake hit, the orphanage buildings were damaged, but remarkably, all of the children survived. Some were rescued by workers from the Netherlands and France, where many of the children had adoptive families waiting. There were 54 children remaining, and Jamie and Ali knew that they were on borrowed time. They managed to send a message from a stranger's Blackberry device to their family back home. They didn't ask for help in their own return. They asked for everyone to come together, to get someone who had connections to

get refugee status for the orphaned children so that they could come immediately to the United States. This message sparked a huge joint effort, led by Pennsylvania Governor Rendell, to bring the orphans here.

Finally, a plane arrived in Haiti with 2 ½ tons of medical supplies and workers. The supplies were delivered, the workers stayed, and just as the children were about to be loaded onto the plane, Haitian authorities said they would only allow 27 of them to leave the country. Jamie and Ali said that it was all or none, and so after more hours of negotiations, the whole group was allowed to board the plane for Miami. A head count on the plane revealed that one child was missing, and so Jamie bid her sister and the 53 orphans farewell, and left to find the missing orphan. She found 2-year old Emma at the US Embassy, and the two of them traveled to Pittsburgh a day after the rest of the orphans had arrived.

Families across this country have poured out their love, clamoring to adopt orphans. Millions of dollars have been donated for aid, including \$1.2 million raised by Coach Calipari and the Wildcats. It is often in times of humanitarian crises that we see people come together, bridging all divisions, to help each other out. It is in times like this that we are reminded of our common bonds, reminded that what brings us together is much greater than what separates us. Sometimes it is easier to cross major boundaries in sharing God's love with others than it is to show God's love to those who are closest to us.

Our gospel reading is a great illustration of this truth. In last week's reading, Jesus stood and read from a scroll in the Temple, a passage from the prophet Isaiah. The first response to his reading is that "All spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth. They said, "Is not this Joseph's son?" And then it goes downhill from there. Jesus points out how often prophets are rejected by their own people; how Elijah and Elisha, for example, were not sent to the Israelites in need, but to foreigners. Before long, all in the synagogue are filled with rage and ready to hurl Jesus off the cliff.

Love is a great ideal when we are reaching across oceans to help others, but when it comes to living lovingly and peaceably with our own neighbors, the challenges really start. In many ways the words in this chapter of Corinthians are appropriate words to start a marriage. After all, patience, kindness, and selflessness are much easier to manage in courtship than they are when you are living and breathing in the same space, really having to make more room for someone besides yourself.

This kind of love can be difficult to manage in a small town like Harrodsburg. Think of the relationships we have with our Christian neighbors here. We come together at times during the year, but aren't we guilty of being, at times, envious, boastful, or resentful? Do we insist on our own way? Do we resent the churches where former members of OUR church now find a home? Are

we envious of their resources, buildings, or staff? Loving those with whom we disagree can be very difficult, indeed.

And even in our own church, do we always show the kind of love towards each other that God calls us to show? Paul's letter to the Corinthians encourages them to be a body, and to value and respect every member of the body equally. It really would be easier, in many ways, just to let a few people make important decisions and have the rest of us follow. But when all of us get involved, disagreements can escalate and lead to divisions that are really hard to repair.

One of the ordination questions asked of all officers in our church is if we promise to be a friend among colleagues in ministry. We are charged to serve the people with energy, imagination, intelligence, and love. There aren't very many questions asked, so the fact that the vows include being a friend in ministry and serving the people with love highlights just how important friendship and love are to the life and unity of the church.

When it gets down to the nitty gritty of church business, it is all too easy to insist on our own way, to be irritable with each other, and to fail to show the kind of love that Paul is talking about. Paul has urged the church in Corinth to involve all members, not to boast regarding any particular gifts for leadership. Whatever gifts we may possess are ultimately worthless if we don't use them with love and gentleness. How easy is it to criticize others? To critique the church leadership if

we disagree with decisions they make? Or to criticize others because they aren't as involved or don't contribute in ways that we feel they should? Critique is so much easier than collaboration. It is easier to complain about others than to speak the truth in love, easier to tear down than to build up.

The last couple of weeks we have spent a lot of time hearing about the need for all of us to discover and share our gifts for common ministry, but today we are reminded that anything we do is empty and in vain if we fail on the most basic charge of ministry – to love all as God loves us. We have challenges before us as a church in answering our call to ministry. There are many needs in the world around us. We might not see how we can address those needs and meet our challenges, but love believes all things, hopes all things, and endures all things. We may not have the answers, but for now we see dimly, and know only in part.

But God, who knows all, has brought us together. God has knit us together, and has known us from the womb. The Giver of all things has endowed us with gifts, and activates them through the Holy Spirit who lives and moves among us. The gifts that we have are varied and diverse, but all of them are important. But the most important gift of all, the one that is first and last, is the gift of love, embodied perfectly in the love of our Savior, Jesus Christ. Let us live in that love, and share that love with all of our sisters and brothers, far and near, in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.