

The Greatest of These  
I Corinthians 13.1-13  
January 31, 2016  
Ordination of Deacons  
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We return to I Corinthians for a third week as we continue to read this ancient letter from Paul to a church he founded in Corinth. It is always good to remind ourselves of what we are doing when we read from these letters and explore them for the truth they hold in their ancient words. These letters from Paul, or people writing in Paul's teaching tradition, were sent to various gatherings of the early church. If we were to sit and read the entire letter, we would quickly note that the writer is responding to questions asked of him in their own letter.

These words are old, old counsel being sent to a struggling community of believers who are at a point of crisis that threatens to be the end of them, but they have reached out to Paul for help in faith that he is one who can move them forward. They have lost their bearings and are at each other's throats. They continue to meet together, pray, and embody what they know of the Jesus story, but they remain influenced and shaped by the culture in which they live—just as we do now.

From what we can gather, they were a socio-economically diverse community "ranging from prosperous household heads to slaves. This socioeconomic diversity [was] highly unusual for any voluntary association"<sup>1</sup> particularly in an ancient culture with strict class divisions. Scholars like Richard Hays of Duke University help us to understand how these early faith communities likely looked and organized themselves.

The wealthiest members of the community hosted house churches of 30-50 members, and scholars suspect a few of those gatherings existed in Corinth. Each group shared a meal as part of their worship and practice of the Lord's Supper, yet the cultural priority of class and stature was influencing their gatherings; the wealthiest and most influential were served first, with the poorest and least influential served last. That thinking permeated all aspects of their church.

Paul is addressing all of these house churches as The Church at Corinth as his letter was likely passed to each gathering and read aloud there. At the risk of being anachronistic

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<sup>1</sup> Richard B. Hays, *Interpretation: I Corinthians*, p. 7 and Introduction, pp. 1-14

with human emotions, imagine our lowest, most vulnerable moment as a community being written about and documented publicly, only from one perspective of the story. We might have some details to add or a different angle to share. We might be ashamed, resentful, angry, or embarrassed to know others were reading about us in a poor light. In part, that is what we are holding in our hands today.

We can't put together the whole story of who Paul was addressing, how they gathered and worshiped, what their strengths were, or how they went on to embody the Jesus Way as a community of faith. We have this one glimpse, and in it we are likely to see something of ourselves.

We heard from chapter 12 in two parts—the first was Paul's teaching that God uniquely gifts every person of faith in a distinct way that serves the life and ministry of the church. It was important to him to explain "there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit" is the Source of each gift, and each gift is to be used for the common good. He repeats himself—same Spirit, one Spirit, same Spirit—as he explains that the different roles we play in the church are linked by the presence of God. He is also saying that each of us is of equal value in God's eyes.

Last week we looked at the analogy of the church as a body with each of us making up various parts of the body. While the dominant Greek teaching of this analogy may have been to illustrate how the upperclass, leadership head is the better part and the remainder of the body is subordinate and serves the highest part, Paul taught something different. In Paul's teaching, the Way of Jesus draws each of us into equal and necessary relationship with one another.

It is important to add up what we know of this community and what Paul has written to them prior to chapter 13 verse 1 because we will automatically think of romantic love when we hear the next words. We will think of weddings. Maybe these words were even read in your own wedding, and your mind will start to wander there. They are beautiful words and certainly good words to guide a marriage and a home. And in many ways they really are "home" words because they were written to the household of God, the living community of believers who embody God's presence in the world.

Let us read now the third reading from I Corinthians 13, and I will pick up a few verses ahead in 12.27.

Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it. **28** And God has appointed in the church first apostles, second prophets, third teachers; then deeds of power, then gifts of healing, forms of assistance, forms of leadership, various

kinds of tongues. **29** Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Are all teachers? Do all work miracles? **30** Do all possess gifts of healing? Do all speak in tongues? Do all interpret? **31** But strive for the greater gifts. 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. **2** 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. **3** 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.

**4** Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant **5** or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; **6** it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. **7** It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

**8** 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. **9** For we know only in part, and we prophesy only in part; **10** but when the complete comes, the partial will come to an end. **11** 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.

**12** 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. **13** And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love.

It is tempting for us to separate ourselves from the ancient churches of the 1st century. We're evolved, we know better, we have more information and wisdom and centuries of writing from the best of Christian tradition. And yet, we must remember we are not just St. Charles Avenue Baptist Church on the corner of St. Charles and Broadway in New Orleans in 2016. We are part of the churches of New Orleans and the churches of the South and the churches of the United States and the Church in the World in the 21st century. Our story will be remembered and studied as history. Future people of faith will consider how we responded to the realities and needs of our world. We must consider: How are we living out the ways of love when the culture around us doesn't value what we value? How are we maturing in faith to embody a love that never ends? And what might it mean for us to live out that Love in the world around us?

Of the language Paul uses, Professor Brian Peterson notes, "Paul's claims are that love 'shows patience' and 'acts with kindness.' Here, love is a busy, active thing that never

ceases to work. It is always finding ways to express itself for the good of others. The point is not a flowery description of what love 'is' in some abstract and theoretical sense, but of what love does, and especially what love does to one's brother or sister in the church."<sup>2</sup>

The love we are to live out as the church is active. Love is linked to truth-telling and justice-seeking; confession and action. We can't deny that. Paul has just addressed people who feed the wealthy before they feed the poor not out of absent-mindedness or lack of proximity to people in need, but in the very homes where they have gathered for study and worship. Paul has used hundreds of words to explain that God gifts and sustains us all for the good of one another. God does not favor me proclaiming at the microphone over one who barely made it to church today and hasn't spoken a word to anyone. Same God, same Spirit, same Source, same love and value for everyone. The work to which they are called is to first understand the love they are to have for one another and then the way that love can change the world.

We are called to an active love that values all people, makes room for all people in our homes and in our worship, and challenges the way our culture defines status, power, and value. It isn't enough to merely name that truth and hope it will be. To embody the transformational love of God here in this place and throughout our city and region and nation and world, we must be intentional and active.

When love sees injustice, love speaks up. When love notices hunger, love feeds. When love hears of inequality and disparity, love acts. When love knows of water that is too dirty to drink but served anyway, love intervenes. Prophetic teaching, bold acts of faith, generosity toward all people—these tasks of the church are rooted in a love that has the power to change the structures of this world. This is not the territory of political parties or politicians. This is the work of the Divine and the call on Christ's Church—love each other as God loves you, love in dynamic and structure shattering ways, love for the good of all and the healing of all, love until it is what you are most known for.

In several weeks, after the parades are over and our lenten practices are winding down, we'll gather at dusk in this room and remember the night that Jesus was betrayed when Jesus washed the feet of his friends. We will read together the words that inform why we gather here: " I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another."

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<sup>2</sup> [http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary\\_id=2734](http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=2734)

Within this congregation, we take seriously the command to love one another. As we consider how we show love for one another here—the kind of loving patience and kindness Paul describes, the true Love of God, we set apart a small group of servant leaders as our Diaconate. Deacons are tasked with noticing our lives, loving us without judgment, modeling a way of welcoming the stranger, listening to the voice of the congregation and the concerns of your hearts. They partner with me in ministry and prayer, and together we work for the good of St. Charles and its role of being the love of Christ in this corner of our world.

Today we ordain two more, Steve Shaw and Karen Babin, to the servant leadership of the Diaconate. Steve is already ordained as a minister of the gospel and works as a military chaplain, and he brings his pastoral skills to the service of this church. Karen Babin is an ardent champion for peace and justice and this year's chair of the Mission Action Committee. With affection and gratitude, we welcome these two into their roles as Deacons. Let us prepare for their blessing.