

The Foundation of Unity: True Love

I CORINTHIANS 12:27-13:8 (NRSV) *Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it. ²⁸And 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. ²⁹Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Are all teachers? Do all work miracles? ³⁰Do all possess gifts of healing? Do all speak in tongues? Do all interpret? ³¹But strive for the greater gifts. And I will show you a still more excellent way. ^{13:1}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. ²And 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. ³If 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. ⁴Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant ⁵or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; ⁶it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. ⁷It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. ⁸Love 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.

Seven Principles of Unity: Memory Verses:

Principle 1: The Priority of Unity ~ It is the Secret of God's Will

EPHESIANS 1:9-10 (NRSV) *(God) has made known to us the mystery of his will, according to his good pleasure that he set forth in Christ, ¹⁰as a plan for the fullness of time, to unite all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth.*

Principle 2: The Tools of Unity: Words that Build Up and Give Grace

EPHESIANS 4:29 (NRSV) *Let no evil talk come out of your mouths, but only what is useful for building up, as there is need, so that your words may give grace to those who hear.*

Principle 3: The Foundation of Unity ~ and here is today's memory (4) verses:

I CORINTHIANS 13:4-7 (NRSV) *Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant ⁵or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; ⁶it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. ⁷It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. ⁸Love never ends.*

These four verses often can be found inscribed in lovely calligraphy, suitably framed, hanging in homes and offices. "A hymn to love," it's called. Such reverence for the passage creates problems for the preacher, because the text is regularly lifted out of context. Love becomes an abstract ideal.

The beauty of the language obscures the practical, compelling force of the words. The setting and context are lost: a conflicted congregation, caught up in a distorted spirituality, engaged in intense power struggles... all that is lost in the admiration of the beautiful poetry.

The biblical preacher's first task, then, is to anchor the text solidly in its context. Of course, these are beautiful words; but they're not written to idealize and praise the quality of love. The Corinthian Christians were quarreling over whose spiritual gifts are more important (the gift of speaking in unknown tongues seems

to have made its way to the top of the pecking order). They were boasting about how "spiritual" they are; and Paul writes these words because the Corinthian Christians need to know that their fervent religiosity isn't worth a plugged nickel apart from a different relationship with each other: ***"If I speak in the tongues of men or of angels, but do not have love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal."***

The conflicts at Corinth, the power struggles, confusion, and disunity all are caused by a spirituality without love. Disunity at Corinth will not be healed by further honing of the gifts or by a call for sacrifice, but by the practice—not theory or philosophy or idealism, but the practice—of *"a still more excellent way"* (12:31).

The spiritual gifts belong to the present. They are essential tools for fully manifesting the Body of Christ; but their end will come. Love, on the other hand, is the supreme feature of the future age and therefore "never ends." As such it participates in; indeed, it precisely describes the unity that is that "Mystery of God's Will" we talked about two weeks ago. It is to be pursued above all else. Without love the exercise of spiritual gifts is an empty, pointless endeavor.

If the world's population would live by this "still more excellent way", there would be no problems. In these four verses, there are fourteen qualities in love:

1. *Love is patient,*
2. *and kind.*
3. *Love is not envious,*
4. *or boastful;*
5. *or arrogant.*
6. *or rude. (NIV says, "It does not dishonor others," MSG says, "...doesn't force itself on others")*
7. *Love does not insist on its own way; (NLT says, "...does not demand its own way," NIV says, "it is not self-seeking," GNT says, "...it is not selfish," MSG says, "...isn't always 'me first'")*
8. *it is not irritable "NIV says, "...easily angered,")*
9. *or resentful; (NIV says, "...it keeps no record of wrongs." MSG says, "...doesn't keep score of the sins of others," and the ERV says, "...does not remember wrongs done against it.")*
10. *does not rejoice at wrongdoing but rejoices in the truth.*
11. *Love bears all things; (The variations are very interesting here! NIV says, "...always protects," NLT says, "...never gives up," MSG says, "...puts up with anything," and ERV says, "never gives up on people,")*
12. *believes all things, (NIV says, "...always trusts, NLT says, "...never loses faith," MSG notes, specifically, "...trusts God always,")*
13. *Hopes all things, (MSG says, "...always looks for the best,")*
14. *endures all things. (NIV says, "...always perseveres." MSG says, "...never looks back,*

but keeps going to the end.”

15. Love never ends.

Whew! Are you exhausted? There's nothing abstract here! How can we love in the way this passage describes? Had we read the rest of the chapter we'd find a clue in the contrast between the transient, incomplete present and the permanent, fulfilled future. The images are powerful: the difference between how a child thinks and how an adult thinks; the difference between a distorted reflection in a flawed mirror and a face-to-face meeting. We don't see it. We don't understand it.

But the clue is in verse 12: *“Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known.”* *“...even as I am fully known...”* present tense. The God who occupies and indeed is the architect of that yet-to-be-fulfilled future already knows and loves and claims us! God knows our names!

Now, all of that's wonderful; and it's theologically correct. But I think there's a simpler way, if we can't understand it, we can experience love—and express it—in our passing, incomplete present time. Things get complicated when we begin with ourselves. But, I remember reading or hearing somewhere that love for another is best received when it is expressed in a way that is a blessing to the other "as she or he sees it." Let me tell you a story:

No man ever loved a woman more than Jo Lynn's dad loved her mom. They met when he was 13 and got a paper route and started delivering papers to her house. From the first moment he saw her, he was a goner. Never was there a more beautiful love story.

He loved to surprise her with romantic gifts—and she loved it (especially when it was cash!) In their later years Joe wanted to take her on a train trip across the country. He made all the arrangements: envisioned them holding hands in the club car, watching the Great Plains slide by. He envisioned sunset dinners in the dining car, with the Rocky Mountains majestically saluting as they rode by.

But there was a lump in the gravy. She didn't like trains. She had told him so. She didn't want to take that trip; but, he wanted it so bad; and he was just sure that once she got aboard and the trip was underway, she'd love it.

The only harsh word I ever heard from either of them about the other, was her resentment about being forced to go on that train trip. Truly loving someone means that he or she gets to decide what is the "loving way" in which to be treated.

Which is just another way of saying, *“Therefore all things whatsoever ye would that men should do to you, do ye even so to them”* (MATTHEW 7:12 KJV).

On that foundation, unity can be built anywhere.