

The Foundation of Unity

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.*

A Quick review: this is the third in a series of sermons titled, "Seven Principles of Unity".

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, ¹⁰ as a plan for the fullness of time, to gather up all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth. (NOTE: NIV says, "...to bring unity to all things..."; RSV says, "...to unite all things...")*

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 ~ Love

- TODAY: I CORINTHIANS 13:4-7 (NRSV) *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.*

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 abstraction—an 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 struggles... all that gets lost in the adoration 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 as a soliloquy to romantic love. They're written to a church 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're bragging about how "spiritual" they are; and these words are written because those Corinthian Christians

need to know that their passionate religiosity isn't worth a plugged nickel apart from a new relationship with one another: *"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 and confusion are caused by loveless spirituality. The remedy is not a sharper honing of the gifts or a call for sacrifice. The remedy is the practice—not the theory or the philosophy or the ideal, but the practice—of *"a still more excellent way"* (12:31).

The spiritual gifts belong to the present time; they are essential to the full manifestation of 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. It's what makes the exercise of spiritual gifts a positive 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 fifteen qualities in love:

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| <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. <i>Love is patient,</i> 2. <i>love is kind.</i> 3. <i>It is not envious,</i> 4. <i>or boastful,</i> 5. <i>or arrogant</i> 6. <i>or rude. (NIV says, "It does not dishonor others," MSG says, "...doesn't force itself on others")</i> 7. <i>It does not insist on its own way (repeat 2 more times); (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'")</i> 8. <i>it is not irritable "NIV says, "...easily angered,")</i> 9. <i>or resentful; (NIV says, "...it keeps no record of wrongs." MSG says, "...doesn't</i> | <p><i>keep score of the sins of others," and the ERV says, "...does not remember wrongs done against it.")</i></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 10. <i>does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth.</i> 11. <i>It 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,")</i> 12. <i>Believes all things, (NIV says, "...always trusts, NLT says, "...never loses faith," MSG notes, specifically, "...trusts God always,")</i> 13. <i>always hopes, (MSG says, "...always looks for the best,")</i> 14. <i>endures all things. (NIV says, "...always perseveres." MSG says, "...never looks back, but keeps going to the end."</i> |
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15. *Love never ends.*

A lot of people have difficulty with that last one. They talk about "falling out of love..." That's because we often confuse love with that warm emotion—sometimes soft and tender, sometimes passionate—that often accompanies it.

Love is not an emotion; it's not a feeling. Love is a way of living. Love is commitment; but before it is anything else, Love is a decision. We` can decide to love

one another even in those moments when we don't feel loving.

And it is fortunate for us that love is more than emotion, because feelings and emotions are fleeting and temporary—subject to many forces. But, because Love is a decision and not an emotion, it can remain stable. Love never ends.

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 cross-country train trip, and he made all the arrangements. He 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 passed.

But there was a lump in the gravy. She didn't like trains. She told him so. She didn't want to take that trip; but, he wanted it so bad 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.

Things get complicated when we begin with ourselves. But, I remember reading or hearing somewhere that love offered is best received when it reflects a blessing "as the recipient sees it." I think we can extend that to all our relationships: truly loving someone means he or she gets to decide what it means to be treated with love.

It's another way of saying, "Do unto others, as would have them do unto you."

On that foundation, unity almost builds itself.