

1 Corinthians 13:1-13

The Greatest of These

Conflict seems to be at the core of everything in our news. This is nothing new...there has always been conflict in the lives of human beings. Regardless of the culture or history of a people there is conflict dating back as far as records of human existence can trace. In the midst of the last two years, we certainly have seen conflict permeate our families, homes, and communities in ways we may not have ever anticipated. These have come in the midst of the tensions and uncertainties of a pandemic.

If someone had ever told me that I would have some fundamental differences with any of my siblings or extended family, I would not have thought it possible. But here we are, and there are some strong opinions on vaccines and vaccine mandates, whether or not Covid is really anything more than a bad cold or flu, to the way government is handling things, to the most recent activity regarding the Freedom Convoy going across our country. The pandemic has intensified any disparity in values and belief that were already there. When I look back at things, my own extended family has had different and strong opinions on everything from LGBTQI+ conversations, to politics, to the effect of residential schools on generations of families, climate change, as well as how we attend to our faith and our understanding of scripture.

For a time, I was reading all kinds of things on Facebook and Instagram that frustrated me, in fact, made me angry. Some of those things were on the pages of people that I have always loved. I found myself wondering how I would ever be able to have a conversation with them, or even manage to be face to face visiting with them should the opportunity arise because I was becoming so angry. This didn't sit well with me so a number of months back I quit reading those things especially when it came from family.

I made a choice to have relationships with them because I love them more than the issues we are facing and if it took backing off from my own need to be right and make a point, that was what I would do. I am grateful I did. Recently a close member of the family died and I wanted to speak to others that were deeply affected by the death, people I love. Because I had stopped the hate and made a choice to love I was able to call and sincerely be in the moment with them. I don't know if I could have done that if I had continued to be frustrated about our differences. I am thankful I chose love; it makes my life better and fuller. It really is a selfish stance, but I am okay with that.

All this to say that our scripture reading comes at a time when our families and communities are in upheaval. This reading is the story of the community of faith in Corinth as they were busy being frustrated by one another. Each thinking their ways,

their thoughts, their gifts and understanding were better than another. The scripture just before this is Paul, the letter writer, basically reprimanding the group for their behaviours, for thinking that some people were better than others, that some of the spiritual gifts people brought to the group like wisdom, healing, prophecy, and speaking in tongues, were more important than that of people who did not have those types of gifts.

There was much dissension in this group, not unlike what we are experiencing in our world today and within the Christian community as well. If human beings are involved there is likely going to be those who think they have the answers and insist that they are the ones with the answers. It is really challenging to not be sucked into these conversations and goings-on. People really like making their point. People like being right and will find whatever proof they need to affirm their positions.

None of this is really a problem, we can have different opinions, much of that comes from different lived experiences. The trouble begins when we do not stay open to loving one another and having the grace and respect to listen even when we disagree. As I have read in various forms and ways of being stated, "Just because we disagree, does not mean I hate you."

Paul was not impressed by the way the faithful in Corinth were handling things, and he said so, but what made what he was saying and doing different from others was that he came from a place of love, love that saw the other as valuable, their well-being important, the relationships within the community as integral to the integrity of the witness of love to those who were watching from whatever vantage point that may have had.

So Paul takes all that he has said about the value and status of people within the church, about their dissention, about how unity is important and that all people are needed in order for all gifts and people to work together for good and then says, "I will show you a more excellent way." (1 Cor. 12:31).

The more excellent way was the way of love. The key here is that love is not a warm fuzzy or romantic feeling. Love for Paul was an action. Love is how you engage others and the world. Love is choosing to be patient, choosing to be kind.

Sometimes it is easier to describe what love is not. In our current climate Paul's words are especially impactful. Think about the rhetoric we hear in our places of government, on the news and online, and maybe from our own mouths and compare that to what Paul says that love is not. Love is not envious, boastful, arrogant, or rude. Love does not insist on its own way.

That one is worth hearing again...love does not insist on its own way. Love is not irritable or resentful. Love does not rejoice in wrongdoing. Think about how much one can enjoy the demise of another we disagree with or dislike. That is not love.

Paul goes on to say that love rejoices in the truth. Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. I have to admit that when I read that particular line I do so holding my breath, not because these words are not true, but because I never want these words to make someone feel that they need to stay in an abusive situation or relationship. This kind of love is the responsibility of all, not just one in a relationship. This is about healthy community, family, and partnerships. If you are hurting seek help. There are ways to love people from a distance when necessary.

Still for most of our relationships and lives we are to strive to love because of all the gifts, love is the greatest of them all, and that paired with faith and hope makes for strong relationships, strong congregations, strong people, and strong communities. All the other gifts, spiritual or otherwise, are there for the building up of community. When I say community think broadly, from the community that is your family, to the organizations you are involved in, to the building you call home with others, to our country and world. Community is many things. Our gifts are to be used for the building up of community, but what activates those gifts in a way that brings beauty, healing, and wholeness, is when we do what we do out of love for others.

Love doesn't mean we have to like things that others do, but love chooses to be respectful, kind, honouring, hopeful, faithful, and bears with others even when their ways and means are different from our own. Love looks to the well-being of others. And when everyone is doing that we're each looking out for each other. It is not about feeling important or that you should tell others how best to live their lives. Rather, love stops, listens, learns, and whenever one is coming from the place of Christ like love, then there is time for each person to be heard, to be valued, with the understanding that no one has a corner on right when it comes to their lived experience and how they interact with the world. Love trusts that I am who I am because you are who you are. We are community, micro communities and a global community. Love means that we do our best to keep from harming others.

This change of seeing the world through the actions of love does not happen on the turn of a dime. This is something we practice for a lifetime. Still, love is enduring. Love is the one thing that endures past the moment our lives go from this realm to the next. Love abides in and with God and as such it never ends. Everything else, our struggles, our gifts, our stuff, our pain, all of that will pass, but love goes on. Love is a gift that can be passed from one generation to the next and the next.

May you begin to see others through the eyes and actions of love. In Christ, with Christ, and through Christ. In the power of the Holy Spirit. Amen.