

1 Corinthians 13:1-13 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.

“Love in the Spirit”

I’ve been reading a book lately by Gregory A. Boyd entitled “Repenting of Religion: Turning from Judgment to the Love of God.” His point in the book is that Christ Jesus has set us free from the religion of judgmentalism that comes from our eating of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. Yet, we still judge and continue on in a religion that’s based on judgment rather than a faith that is based in the Love of God. By God’s self-revelation to us in Jesus Christ which we experience in our individual and congregational encounter of God the Holy Spirit we come to know that God the Father is steadfastly loving and faithful and that God is the loving communion of the Persons of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. This real knowledge of God as steadfastly loving and faithful sets us free from the lie that God is a judge whom we must placate with repentance before we can receive that love. Our human tendency to believe this lie about God causes us to be judges ourselves, in fact, to put ourselves into the place of God so that we judge others and ourselves according to whatever standards we choose to create.

He goes on to say that the tendency in the Christian Church has been to continue to eat from the wrong tree with the result that we have created a religion surrounding morality where we judge others and sometimes ourselves according to moral standards believing God does not love us unless we are moral and that he won’t love others outside the church unless they repent of their immorality, accept Christ, and then live morally. The result is conditional gospel is that we become moral judges of one another and the world outside.

Boyd opened the book by recounting a “Eureka!” experience of his own judgmentalism that he had while sitting in a mall people watching. I won’t recount his list of judgments. I will rather recount what I say while people watching and remember I’m a minister: “That person looks like something as useless as one of the characters on the ‘Trailer Park Boys’. Who would let their

teen-age girl dress like a pole-dancer wanna be? What’s wrong with these kids that they have to run around dressed like gang-bangers? That woman shouldn’t yell at her children like that. They’ll grow up to be just like her. Oh, look at Mr. Powerful Business man all slicked up and trying to impress people to overcompensate for his shallowness. Wal-Mart shoppers are traiters to society. She’s cute. Randy, you’re married!” Well, the list could go on.

Back to the book, Boyd said that in the midst of his judging it suddenly hit him that this judging was simply not Christ-like. Jesus did not make manifest to us a God who judges everyone nor a God who loves the sinner and hates the sin. He revealed a God who loves sinners and who indeed do sin and continue to sin no matter how hard we try not to. He then asked, “If judgmentalism is eating from the wrong tree, what should I do instead?” He began the exhausting task of praying for everyone he saw there in the mall that God would bless them and reveal his steadfastly loving and faithful self to them. He found that the more he did this, the more he began to feel compassion, to feel love for these people. Have you ever tried to pray for everyone you see? I have. There is nothing more contrary to our nature and more mentally exhausting than making the effort to be constantly at prayer. Yet, friends it is utterly transforming. Prayer like this is our effort to nurture the Holy Spirit planted seeds of faith, hope, and love. In prayer we become more and more like Christ Jesus.

Love, unconditional love, is the heart of the Christian faith. God has created us anew in Christ by uniting us to him by the gift of the Holy Spirit. He has given us a new way of being that is oriented, minded towards a passionate out-reaching compassion. The Father did not send the Son anointed in the Holy Spirit to live, die, raise, and ascend as a human so that he could be God’s rubber stamp on a religion of judging. He sent him to implant the seed of himself, the seed of unconditional love into the heart of humanity that we whom he has called forth to live now as the embryonic life of the new creation might shine forth God’s love; to live together and towards all humans according to unconditional love so that we reflect the loving communion of persons that God is.

In the church at Corinth they had gotten caught up in power struggle that fed on their judging one another according to who is the most blessed believing that the most blessed should be the ones to lead the congregation. They were judging one another according to false standards rather than loving one another and it was dividing the church. Paul’s point to them was basically, “So what?” If a person believes herself blessed but doesn’t have love, she is ultimately nothing. Nothing means having no existence. Lacking unconditional love means one is not a new creation in Christ Jesus.

In my twenty odd years of involvement in the church I have seen how people gathered around the Lord’s Table can judge one another according to some pretty petty things: how they dress, their weight, the way they keep their house and yard, the behavior of their children, their behavior towards their children, the color of their skin, their odor, what side of the tracks they come from, etc. I know this because I’ve done it. I’ve also been judged. I’ve heard it. I’ve seen Christians look down their noses at people. Congregations as a whole

do it too. I've seen churches blatantly refuse to reach out to the people in the surrounding neighborhood because they were of lower class.

But then there are you folks. Sure you have your faults, but you honestly do seek to let love be genuine in your life together and your reaching out. If you were to ask me why God is letting so many churches dwindle off in number, I would say it is to make them small enough so that they might learn genuine love for one another just as you exhibit it. We may be one of the smallest in the denomination, but indeed we are a pacesetter congregation.

In our passage today Paul gives a long list of words describing love. They are not standards by which we may judge one another. They are descriptive of what human community enlivened by God to reflect his image naturally begins to look like when the people pray and serve one another rather than search out and judge one another's faults. Paul does not tell the Corinthian church that the solution to their problems is in manifesting more and more Spirit-gifts nor developing flagship programs or imitating mega-churches. He tells them that love, unconditional love, is the most excellent way. Continue on and outward in this love. And as we gather together around the Lord's Table this morning as the Bride of Christ for a foretaste of the wedding feast at his return, gather around it knowing that you are an exceptionally beautiful bride. Amen.