

1 Corinthians 12:31 - 13:13 ³¹ But eagerly desire {31 Or But you are eagerly desiring} the greater gifts. And now I will show you the most excellent way. ^{13:1} If I speak in the tongues {1 Or languages} of men and of angels, but have not love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal. ² If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have a faith that can move mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. ³ If I give all I possess to the poor and surrender my body to the flames, {3 Some early manuscripts body that I may boast} but have not love, I gain nothing. ⁴ Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. ⁵ It is not rude, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. ⁶ Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. ⁷ It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. ⁸ Love never fails. But where there are prophecies, they will cease; where there are tongues, they will be stilled; where there is knowledge, it will pass away. ⁹ For we know in part and we prophesy in part, ¹⁰ but when perfection comes, the imperfect disappears. ¹¹ When I was a child, I talked like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I put childish ways behind me. ¹² Now we see but a poor reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known. ¹³ And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love.

Mark 14:3-9 ³ While he was in Bethany, reclining at the table in the home of a man known as Simon the Leper, a woman came with an alabaster jar of very expensive perfume, made of pure nard. She broke the jar and poured the perfume on his head. ⁴ Some of those present were saying indignantly to one another, "Why this waste of perfume?" ⁵ It could have been sold for more than a year's wages {5 Greek than three hundred denarii} and the money given to the poor." And they rebuked her harshly. ⁶ "Leave her alone," said Jesus. "Why are you bothering her? She has done a beautiful thing to me. ⁷ The poor you will always have with you, and you can help them any time you want. But you will not always have me. ⁸ She did what she could. She poured perfume on my body beforehand to prepare for my burial. ⁹ I tell you the truth, wherever the gospel is preached throughout the world, what she has done will also be told, in memory of her."

“A More Excellent Way”

Saturday a week ago, most of the elders and I went to an elder training workshop conducted by John-Peter Smidt, our Synod congregational development consultant. One of his main points was that being an elder isn't so much about what you do for the 'church'. It's more about who you are. He spoke about how in our culture we value people on what they can do more so than on who they are as a person so that in the end, the quality of one's character weighs less than the status derived from what one does. For example, how often does it happen that when we meet somebody new one of the first things we ask is, "So, what do you do?" On the other hand, how fast would a conversation end if one of the first questions we asked was, "What kind of a person are you?" Who would even answer the question honestly? John-Peter went on to point out that elders in the church are not called for what they can do for the church. They are called for their Christian character for the purpose of leadership. Churches don't say, "We want to develop an education program, so let's find some people with education backgrounds and make them elders." Churches shouldn't call ministers for program development either. Those called to be elders are those who by their strength of Christian character can inspire, pastor, and lead other Christians in the formation of their Christian character.

The same could be applied to congregations as a whole. It's not so much what a congregation does. It's more about who we are as the body of Christ. It is about the quality of our communion. John-Peter also pointed out that for the past 20 or so years churches like ours have been doing everything to try to gain back the numbers we had back in our heydays. Yet, for most churches nothing has worked. I'll say that again. For most churches nothing has worked. Very few churches have been successful at finding something new to do that turn things around for them. He said that this is the way things are today. Like a medical condition that can't be cured, we have to accept that people aren't looking for or coming to church and we therefore have to live with that fact. So, since doing isn't working, we ought to start working on our being, on the quality of Christians that we are and the quality of our communion. That means attending to our devotional life, our way of being towards others, and fellowshiping more.

You see, people don't come to church these days because they are looking for something charitable to do nor are they realizing the need to get things right with God and they are not even looking for community (though that is the greatest need facing North Americans today). When they come to a church usually they are coming because something is going on in their lives that they want God's help with and somewhere back in their past they heard they might find that help at a church. In days like these, we Christians and especially church elders, need to be people who walk by the Spirit, the Holy Spirit, in the new life of Christ Jesus *obviously* bearing the fruits of the Spirit: faith, hope, and love, and add to that joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. So that when these people come, they find authenticity.

Well, I mention all this about eldership because it was the underlying problem in Corinth. I've said many times before that Paul apparently did not appoint leaders or elders (presbyteros, Presbyterians;) before he left Corinth. The result was that different factions within the Corinthian house churches began to struggle for control. One of those groups in particular was guilty of what I would call spiritual arrogance. As I said last week it probably looked like a Christian version of the Delphic oracle or some other oracle. They spoke in tongues and interpreted a lot, gave prophecies, and had special insight into things or words of knowledge. Since they appeared to be more attuned to spiritual things, they believed they should be leading the churches in Corinth. Paul's correction of this problem began by telling them they should be desiring that God would raise up in their midst those who had the higher spiritual gift of being an apostle, evangelist, helper, administrator, etc, rather than getting so wound up in the lesser gifts which he says later in chapter fourteen are rather scary to outsiders when they visit.

The same thing goes on today. Back in the days between university and seminary I worked in a hardware store. One day a young guy that I worked with in my restaurant days happened to come in. He started to share with me that he too had met our Lord

and was now a Christian. In the course of the conversation, or should I say it was the center of the conversation, he shared how he had just been to a Benny Hinn stadium-filling event and, thinking that I would know what he was talking about, he was quick to say how awesome it was. Mr. Hinn would just point to a section of the stadium and the people would fallback, slain in the Spirit. If you and/or I being Christians had been at that event, we would have been freaked out. But, they would say that we are not really Christians. And also, if my former workmate were to come to worship here at Claude, he would say that there is something missing because he wasn't getting the rush that he should be getting and he would probably say that the Holy Spirit is not here. But the Holy Spirit is here! You see, when the Holy Spirit really is at work the fruit isn't multitudes being "slain in the Spirit", it is the growth and nurturing of loving fellowship in the image of the loving communion of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit so that we become the human body of Christ here in our community. Paul says at Romans 5:5, "God has poured out his love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, whom he has given us." Love creates community.

Paul continues his instruction to the Corinthians by leading them in the direction of this Holy Spirit-given love saying, I will now make known to you the most excellent way. Without love, tongue speaking is nothing more than banging a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. Without love, prophecy, knowledge, and even faith, amount to nothing. Without love, even acts of sacrificial charity and indeed suffering persecution, gain nothing. It doesn't matter what we as persons do or what we as congregation do, if love is not the core of our character(s), we have gotten on the wrong boat.

Towards the end of the workshop somebody asked how we should go about making the shift from being Christians and churches who "do" to striving to develop our Christian character. Oddly, John-Peter seemed reluctant to answer that question other than to say we should have fewer business meetings. I think because this is something that each congregation and Session needs to work out according to their own giftedness...and we do need to do this. Yet, earlier in the morning he told of a popular British journalist who is an atheist who wrote an article on the relief efforts after Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans. The journalist said that for the most part, churches look and act like community organizations such as Rotary and Kiwanis...there's not much difference. We do a lot but we don't necessarily do the "holy". Yet, he did finish out the article saying that in New Orleans its Christians not atheists providing the relief.

Nevertheless; doing the holy, what is that? Well, what comes to mind for me is the woman who broke the jar of expensive perfume to anoint Jesus body for his burial before he was even dead. She was *attending to Jesus* in such a way that it overflowed with love saying to him "I've heard you. I understand. You are going to suffer and die. I love you." Well, Jesus scolded his disciples for their scolding her for the waste saying, "The poor you will always have with you and you can help them anytime you want, but you will not always have me." Doing the "holy" as I see it is *attending to Jesus* in our lives by giving him space and time in our lives. As individuals, it's as simple as shutting off the TV, the computer, the cell phone, etc, and just sit there acknowledging Jesus as present with you and then, share your burdens and concerns with him... that's prayer, read a chapter or two of Scripture. Just open up space and time to be aware of his presence with you and he will transform you. As a church it means meeting together more often for the sake of just being together and sharing our lives, sharing a meal, and sharing the Lord's Supper with each other. There in the greatest mystery of all is that we will discover that the love of God has been poured into our hearts by the Holy Spirit he has given us. Go there. Otherwise, how can we help those who come seeking Jesus, if we ourselves don't know he's here? Amen.