

## Body of Christ for the World

Last week we left off with Paul telling the little church in Corinth that they were striving for the greater gifts. It's a fitting message for us today, and for the Church today, in general. We should be striving for greater gifts, which allow us to bless more and more people through their connection to the community of faith, and all for the glory of God! Today we're going to check out how we do that, but before we do, I have some thoughts to share with you so that we're together on the same wavelength. First, the Bible tells us that the Church is the body of Christ, with Jesus Himself as the Head. Since we are part of the Church, you and I are members of the body of Christ. This previous Wednesday evening our confirmands discussed the sacraments of the Church – Baptism and Holy Communion. Together we sat down and looked at the *Book of Worship* at the seasonal resources for the Great Thanksgiving – that's what the sacrament of Holy Communion is referred to.

It's interesting, that through the seasons of the year, several chunks of text remain the same, one of them being, "In remembrance of these Your mighty acts in Jesus Christ, we offer ourselves in praise and thanksgiving as a holy and living sacrifice, *in union with Christ's offering for us*, as we proclaim the mystery of faith: Christ has died; Christ has risen; Christ will come again. Pour out Your Holy Spirit on us gathered here, and on these gifts of bread and cup. Make them be for us the body and blood of Christ, *that we may be for the world the body of Christ, redeemed by His blood. By Your Spirit make us one with Christ, one with each other, and one in ministry to all the world.*"<sup>1</sup>. The closing prayer in the Communion service is also always the same: "Eternal God, we give You thanks for this holy mystery in which You have given Yourself to us. *Grant that we may go into the world in the strength of Your Spirit, to give ourselves for others*, in the name of Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen,"<sup>2</sup> (italics added for emphasis). Turn with me to 1 Corinthians 12:31, the last half of that verse, and we're going to read through the whole of chapter 13 to find out how Paul the apostle tells us we do that. **Read 1 Cor. 12:31b-13:13.**

## Show the Most Excellent Way

A lot of times we hear this particular passage during weddings because of its emphasis on unconditional love. It's a great segue into a conversation on how married people ought to treat each other, to be sure. But Paul tells us some remarkable things in this chapter, which address issues we examined in the previous chapter – mainly the issue of disunity. Friends, there is division in the body – whether we want to look at the body of Christ, the Church, or at the larger scope of humanity, there's division. Paul

<sup>1</sup> *The United Methodist Book of Worship*. (Nashville: United Methodist Publishing, 1992), A Service of Word and Table I, page 38.

<sup>2</sup> *BOW*, page 39.

addresses the division and discord, not by calling names – that’s something we tend to do – but instead by focusing on what Jesus displayed for us once for all time on the cross. People in general like to stick labels on people – on others – and when we do that, we end up rolling through the mud with them. Instead, we need to “turn our eyes upon Jesus,” as the hymnist wrote, and Paul tells us “I’ll show you the most excellent way,” (1 Cor. 12:31b), and goes on to talk about all sorts of great gifts and skills that are useful for the Church, to be sure.

Speaking in tongues of people and angels, being able to prophesy, being able to understand all mysteries, having all knowledge, having faith deep enough to move mountains, giving up every possession to the poor, and even going to the extreme of becoming a martyr – that’s what he’s referring to when he talks about “surrender my body to the flames,” in 13:3. Those are all wonderful, appropriate things we should do – but Paul gives us a caveat – a disclaimer, after each one. He says, “if I don’t have love, I gain nothing.” That’s a bitter pill to swallow. There are a lot of folks connected in some fashion to the Church in America today who are in for a rude awakening some day, because they think they’re great and holy, and doing all sorts of stuff that would make you think they’re plugged into Jesus, but they don’t have love.

### **Character Traits**

Listen again to what Paul says are the characteristics – or the actions, if you will of love. “Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It is not rude, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres,” (1 Cor. 13:4-7). Those are amazing, beautiful character traits!

Now, listen to what John, the apostle “whom Jesus loved,” wrote in his first letter, “Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love,” (1 Jn. 4:7-8). God is love. When you look at that list of characteristics Paul lists about love – patient, kind, not envious, not boastful, not proud, not rude, not self-seeking, not easily angered, keeping no record of wrongs, not delighting in evil but rejoicing in truth – those describe God fully revealed to us through the crucified and resurrected Jesus Christ!

We could go further with this idea, because He always protects. He is always trustworthy. He’s is our Hope. And He will always – always persevere, church! There is nothing – absolutely no created thing – in heaven or earth which could possibly ever overcome the overwhelming, relentless love of God poured out for us through Christ crucified and resurrected! Jesus Christ, God-with-us, will always persevere over any problem we face. Christ is more than able to conquer any problem – and He equips

you and me to be more than capable as conquerors over whatever it is we come up against!

Paul goes on in our text. He says, “Love never fails,” (1 Cor. 13:8a). Jesus Christ – God – never fails. Everything else, in all Creation, will fail you if you put your faith in it. That’s what Paul’s telling the Corinthian Church next in the chapter, and us, too. When we trust in Jesus Christ, Who reigns with God the Father and the Holy Spirit, one God, forever, you and I don’t need to worry about ever being failed again. He will never fail us! We can completely, totally count on Him! Praise God! His love for us is amazing, and He’ll never let us slip through His fingers – He’s always faithful, always trustworthy.

### **He Won’t Let Go**

When we put our trust in Him, He will be forever faithful, and He will never let us go. I’m not sure of the back story behind the song, but several years ago, a country music band, Rascal Flatts, came out with “I Won’t Let Go.” Remember last week, how I said we can see evidence all around us of God’s presence, and the need the whole creation has of God, even in the secular? Here’s another example. I want you to listen to this song, and pay close attention to the words, because they could very easily be words God Himself speaks to the Church. (Video located at: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qA0YKJ0\\_lvk](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qA0YKJ0_lvk)). That’s what God says to us today. He’ll stand by us, He’ll help us through, He’ll dry our eyes. He fights for us, holds us in His nail-pierced palms, and keeps us from falling. That’s what God says to us today, church. He’s with us. He loves us! Aren’t you glad you know Him?

Paul tells us, “prophecies will cease; tongues will be stilled; knowledge will pass away,” because “we know in part, and prophesy in part,” (verses 8b-9). He recognizes that there is a limit to our capabilities in this physical body. We have a limited amount of time in this present, physical body, whatever amount of time God, in His infinite wisdom, has determined that we ought to have here below to do what He needs us to do, before He calls us home. That’s the point Paul’s trying to make when he says, “When completeness comes, what is in part disappears,” in verse 10. The idea of completeness he’s talking about here could be translated multiple ways – perfection, fulfillment, conclusion, the end.

### **Overwhelming, Never-ending, Reckless Love of God**

Back in November we held Charge Conference here at New Hope. It’s basically a church-wide business meeting to set the agenda and program of the local church for the coming year. Pastor Bill Halter, from Aley United Methodist Church was our presiding elder, and he made a statement during our time together, which was echoed roughly a week and a half later at Keith’s celebration of life by Jeff. “Beloved, we are God’s children now; what we will be has not yet been revealed. What we do know is

this: when He is revealed, we will be like Him, for we will see Him as He is.” Friends, that’s a quote from John the Apostle’s first letter (1 Jn. 3:2).

When perfection comes – when I hear the word, “perfection,” my mind immediately thinks of Jesus Christ – the Living God, breathing Perfection wrapped in human flesh. When perfection comes – when we see Jesus Christ – all the incomplete stuff, the partial stuff, it’s all going to fade away. Paul drives this point home. He says, “When I was a child, I thought like a child. When I became a man, I put the ways of childhood behind me,” (1 Cor. 13:11). He expands on this idea, saying, “For now we see only a 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,” (verse 12). Who is it that fully knows us? It’s God. He made us. The word says – we heard this earlier from Melissa this morning – “Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, before you were born I set you apart; I appointed you as a prophet to the nations,” (Jer. 1:5). He knows you and me better than we know ourselves. He also sees our every flaw and shortcoming. He sees every sin we commit, but loves us still. “And now these three remain: faith, hope, and love. But the greatest of these is love,” (1 Cor. 13:13). Aren’t you thankful that in spite of ourselves, God pursues and woos you with His overwhelming, never-ending, reckless love?

**Prayer:** O God of all the prophets, You knew us and chose us before You formed us in the womb. Fill us with faith that speaks Your word, hope that does not disappoint, and love that bears all things for Your sake, until that day when we shall know You fully, even as we are known by You. Amen.