

The Way of Jesus
from the pulpit of
Bryn Mawr Presbyterian Church
Bryn Mawr, Pennsylvania
by
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Readings: I Corinthians 13:1-13

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When the apostle Paul writes his famous love chapter to the church at Corinth he does so with an advantage we do not share. He writes in a language, Greek, that provides several different words to describe various kinds of love. Most of us know this well and are inclined to forgive the English language for its limited vocabulary. English is limited to one word to describe everything that is “love”, from falling in or out of romantic relationships with significant others to describing the motivation for a father’s willingness to give his life for his son.

When we speak of affections we talk of our *love* for someone. The Greeks spoke of these things too but when they did they used a form of their word *eros* which has to do with romantic love.

Similarly, when we speak of how much we value friendship and loyalty we still speak of our *love* for our brothers and sisters in the community because we do not have a word quite like *philia* to describe brotherly love.

But the greatest advantage given to Paul by the Greek language in which he wrote of *love* is the distinction that comes with a third form of the word we have for love. For Paul the word was a description of the kind of love that is God-like, self-giving and self-sacrificing. It is, in the Greek, called *agape*.

This is the form of love he is referring to in I Corinthians 13. He is not referring to romantic love in spite of our insistence on using this passage at weddings. And he is not calling us only to more consistent brotherly love. Instead, he is calling us to love one another even when we don’t like the other person, even when he or she acts in ways that are anything but brotherly or sisterly. This love of

which Paul speaks here is an expensive love. This love costs you something precious. This love costs you that part of yourself you are least wanting to give. This is the love we see in Jesus.

This love calls for you to go down within the self to your very core and to find there the motivation, perhaps the courage, to act in ways toward others that are quite unlike the ways you may want to act. You happen to know what this love looks like because you have seen Jesus. This is Henri Nouwen's emphasis in his book, *In the Name of Jesus*. Jesus is the only one who can show us love without the shadows. His love even holds up in the bright light of day.

This is love that embraces the most obnoxious bully, the most boorish fellows, the superficial ones, the opinionated ones, the liars, the slow-witted, the self-righteous, the too-religious. This love of which Paul now speaks in I Corinthians costs you something of yourself. That is why our best efforts at translating agape often settle on "self-giving" because it is a part of our precious selves that is called for if we are to endure those other persons. Notice, by the way, Paul's use of that word "endure." When he is listing the leading characteristics of this God-like love he reminds us that this love "endures all things." That means enduring, putting up with, one another also. Even your cousin Horace.

Martin Copenhaver writes that this endurance is not the same as acting in a civilized way. He says, "I believe that, as Christians, we are summoned to something larger, more exciting, more challenging, and yes, more elusive than mere civility. Civility is not a Christian concept. It is a thoroughly secular notion"¹

Enduring all things is more than showing good manners toward others. And it is more than shaking hands with one another before we do battle, like football captains just before the coin toss. And it is more than good Senator-like behavior toward those on the other side of the aisle with whom we most strongly disagree. Our witness toward one another is quite unique compared to those examples of civility.

Civility, for a southerner (where I spent my early, formative years), is experienced as polite hospitality to a Yankee. "Brother, fix ol' Phillip here a bourbon shooter. His glass is a little dry." Love that endures all things (*agape*) is that same southerner embracing that same Yankee as his future son-in-law: "I want

¹ Martin Copenhaver, essay in *Congregations*, (The Alban Institute, Bethesda, Md., Spring 2004), p. 24.

to thank you for how happy you have made our Patricia.” Expressing that kind of love required more than mere civility from “Big Daddy.”

Over the years we have heard Paul’s ode to self-giving love read by a host of interpreters. Listen once more to Paul’s litany and see if you think I am emphasizing the right words:

“Love is patient and kind; love is not jealous or boastful; it is not arrogant or rude. Love does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice at wrong, but rejoices in the right. Love bears *all* things, believes *all* things, hopes *all* things, endures *all* things.” (I Cor. 13:4-7)

Still contrasting civility to enduring love, Pastor Martin Copenhaver remarks that “the word civility connotes a refined, ritualized cover-up. Civility is the polite encounter of our studied selves. It is a meeting of masks, the public smile that hides the private sneer. And that is not all bad, because sometimes that thin veneer of civility is the only thing that keeps people from going at each other’s throats.

“I do not believe, however,” he continues, “that what we most need in the church is more civility. We have all witnessed a great deal of civility in church gatherings. For instance, warriors in church meetings shake hands to show that they do not bear weapons, only to wait until they are out in the parking lot with their friends, where they can whip out those weapons and tear up their adversaries in absentia.

“Or two colleagues striving together find themselves disagreeing, then pulling against each other, and finally at odds. Then, after a brief and hot war, a long, cold truce ensues. The combatants know they should be civil, so they continue to smile, with clenched teeth, when they see each other. They still talk when they find themselves together, but never again do they delve beneath the surface together; never again do they meet in any significant way. To be sure, civility beats some of the alternatives. Nonetheless, we are summoned to something larger than mere civility.

“First,” writes Copenhaver, “we are summoned to confession. We have not loved one another as God first loved us. Contrary to the still more excellent way that Paul commends to us, we have not been patient or kind; we have been envious, boastful, arrogant, rude. We have insisted on our own way. We have been irritable, resentful. We have rejoiced in the wrong (particularly when our enemies have been in the wrong), and we have not rejoiced in the right. Let us confess these things.

“Jesus said, ‘By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another’ (John 13:35). Given the current state of much of the larger church,” suggest Copenhaver, “that is a summons to confession.”²

Secondly, as we have said already, we are called to endure one another, no matter what. We are not members of a perfect society, whatever that looks like. We are members of a church, a family, and as such we are called to put up with the obnoxious cousins and the overbearing aunts as well as the gentle-giant grandfathers and ever-loving grandmothers. We don’t get to choose our families and we don’t get to choose our churches. If we go shopping for the perfect church we will never find it. All are marked by sin. All are tainted by pride and power and politics. All are in need of confession, as Copenhaver has said.

Thirdly, we are called to reconciliation. James Forbes, a former pastor of the Riverside Church in New York City “...has observed that the ones we most cannot stand are the very ones we most need.”³ It is a cruel and blessed irony that the ones we dislike the most are the ones from whom we stand to learn the most about the God we worship. (Compare the Samaritan and the man in the ditch.) If we begin with the understanding that God has chosen and loved and used these individuals we find so reprehensible then it is not far to the realization that God just may be using them to reach us. Perhaps the ones we dislike the most are those who are foreign, or from backgrounds different from ours, or whose notion of the mission of the church seems nothing more than warmed over business plans for profitable companies.

If we will make the effort to know and appreciate these people, to be reconciled to them, we will often discover that God is using them to show us “the more perfect way” of which Paul speaks. The more we learn about them, different from us though they may be, the more we discover about God. And isn’t that what we claim we want, namely: to know God more dearly and to follow God more nearly?

To know God is to know reconciliation in action. It is to be exposed to the magnanimous, inclusive, embrace of the one who sent a son among us to show us the way of reconciliation, making friends with all in God’s good creation. That is, to show us what love in action looks like.

² *Ibid.*, p. 25.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 26.