The Body of Christ, Part 3: Stop. Look. Love. 1 Corinthians 13:1-13

The Bloomfield Presbyterian Church on the Green Fourth Sunday after Epiphany February 3, 2013

Today's sermon is the the third of a three-part sermon series on the "The Body of Christ," based on 1 Corinthians 12 & 13. "To each has been given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good (1 Corinthians 12:7)," was our focus on Week 1. Last Sunday's sermon, *Life Together*, was based on the assumption that *life in Christ = life together*, and I began and ended with a quote from Thomas Merton. "We are already one. We just think we're separate."

Paul's extended meditation on the church as the body of Christ in 1 Corinthians 12 ends with a tantalizing, cliff-hanger of a sentence. If you liked all that stuff about spiritual gifts being given to the various members of the body, read on, because, Paul writes, I will now "show you a still more excellent way (1 Corinthians 12:31b)." A still more excellent way? What could that be?

That more excellent way is the famous hymn to love in 1 Corithians 13 that I guess you've probably heard at most of the weddings you've ever attended, including perhaps your own. "If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging symbol." And so on.

Like Psalm 23 and the Christmas story, this passage has emotional weight. It appears frequently on greeting cards. It can bring a tear to the eye, involuntary pangs of longing or a sigh of bitter regret. For the most part, we associate 1 Corinthians 13 with romance culminating in marriage, and the hearing of it conjures up brides maids bouquets, a wedding gown, tuxedos, and "the kiss."

But, guess what. As we can see from that tantalizing, cliff-hanger of a connecting verse, Paul didn't write 1 Corinthhians 13 with starry-eyed young couples in mind! Paul is writing to a church about *church life*. More specifically, Paul is writing to a *conflicted church* urging its members to bring their behavior toward one another back in line with the good news of the gospel.

Those famous words, "So faith, hope, love abide, but the greatest of these is love," works great at a wedding, but they came to us in a very different context to address a very different life situation. Before 1 Corinthians 13 became the default wedding scripture reading it belonged here, as a vital word to the gathered faith community about how best to maintain unity-in-diversity.

One way to maintain unity-in-diversity is to remember that there are varieties of gifts but that each is given by the same Spirit (Week 1). Another way is for each individual to

think of him or herself as an equal member of the body (Week 2). And another way, a "still more excellent way" of maintaining unity-in-diversity is to keep love in the center of all that we are and do (Week 3).

"Love. Love. All you need is love," goes arguably the best Beatles song ever. "Love is all you need."

But love, as we all know, is easier said than done, easier sung about than lived in the day-to-day details of life together. Which I suspect is why Paul gets out of the abstract fairly quickly in 1 Corinthians 13 and gets down to the details. Without love, we are nothing, says Paul. But what is love, you ask? I'm about to tell you, says Paul. Love is:

- 1) patient
- 2) kind

Love is not:

- 1) jealous
- 2) boastful
- 3) arrogant
- 4) rude
- 5) insistent on its own way
- 6) irritable
- 7) resentful

This is a list. It has the lilt of an inspirational poem, but it can easily be turned into a checklist of behaviors. Dos. and Don'ts.

Notice that feelings have nothing to do with it. How you feel about the person you are trying to love is not even in the equation. To love is to be patient. End of sentence. To love is to be kind. Period. Jealousy, arrogance, resentment and the like are unloving. That is all.

Feelings are real. Feelings affect us in powerful ways. To be loving requires us to manage our feelings so that they do not deflect us from acting in loving ways, as Christ commands.

Hurt and Anger are some of the hardest feelings to manage. When Hurt and Anger come, they let themselves into the chambers of our heart like bad relatives and they stay there. They like to eat. They consume our time and attention, they are messy, and they will not leave voluntarily. Hurt and Anger must be escorted to the door and bid a firm goodbye, so that we can get back to being our true selves in the one body, knit together in Christ's love.

Love does not rejoice in wrongdoing. Not even in the wrongdoing of the people we don't like. Love bears all things. Love endures all things. Love never ends.

Love never ends.

That is not an abstract statement. That is a fact. All we have to do is remember the cross, taste the elements on the Communion table, and sense the movement of the Holy Spirit to know for a fact that love can survive the onslaught of anything. I don't mean romantic love or sentimental love. I mean action-oriented, determined-in-the-face-of-all-odds, Jesus love. It can survive the onslaught of anything. I am convinced. Paul was convinced. "Faith, hope and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love."

Lonni Collins Pratt is the co-author of a book called <u>Radical Hospitality</u> and in her book she tells the story of a time that she and her husband lived across the road from a small log cabin1. This small log cabin was empty for much of the time, but then someone moved in. A man moved in to fix up the cabin, and, although Lonni was quite an introvert, her husband wasn't. He walked right up to the cabin door, knocked, introduced himself and talked with the man who had just moved in. He came back and told Lonni, "You really ought to get to know this guy. He's fascinating. He's fixing up this place. It's going to be wonderful."

A few weeks passed and then, in the middle of the night, when everyone was asleep, Lonni heard a scream -- the scream of an adult. It came from across the road. From the log cabin. She bolted upright in her bed because it was the kind of scream that wakes you up in the middle of the night and makes you want to just hide in a corner. And she went to the window, and she listened until that scream began to fade. And she went back to bed, but she could hardly sleep. And the next night the same thing happened: a scream coming from the cabin.

The following day was a cool October day, and Lonni had made some chili. She took a big bowl of the chili and a thermos of coffee and a couple slices of pie, and went over, and knocked on the cabin door. She met Les, the man who lived there. Les, she said, looked a little bit like Willie Nelson, and he was very gracious and let her in, and they sat down, and they ate the chili and the pie, and as they were finishing up drinking coffee, Les got to talking about his life, how he liked to fix up little houses and fix them up in such a way that eventually some young family would come in and take them over and live there and improve the neighborhood.

He never stayed in one place very long, Les said. He had moved to a lot of places, didn't have a lot of family and friends, but that was OK. He got to know people as he moved around.

And then he said he had been in Vietnam, a place that was pretty hard to get out of, he said; in fact, most of the time he feels like he's still living there, he said.

And because Lonni listened deeply, she heard the things that Les said, though he never really used the words. What he really said to her was, I hope you'll tolerate this season of screaming from a man who'll eventually move on. I hope you'll share this season of suffering, because, one day, a nice young family will come in across the street and it will be much better. But, for now, I appreciate the fact that you're willing to smile at a man in the morning after you've probably heard him scream at night.

Lonni says when you really listen to someone scream against the darkness you're never the same anymore. It's true, isn't it?

Christian love listens deeply. It listens to the words that are being said, and it listens to what the heart is also saying even though sometimes the heart can't find the words to string it all together. Listening in that sort of way is the beginning of understanding. And the beginning of understanding is often the beginning of the kind of love like that Paul describes in our scripture reading for today.

This is the love that we celebrate when we partake of the Lord's Supper. This is the love that the Sacrament of Communion replenishes in us. This is the love that can survive the onslaught of anything. This love never ends.

To the glory of God.

Amen.

~Rev. Ruth L. Boling

1Paraphrased from <u>Radical Hospitality: Benedict's Way of Love</u>, by Father Daniel Homan & Lonni Collins Pratt, (Paraclete Press: 2005).