Text: 1 Corinthians 12:31b-13:13

**The Bethel Pulpit**

**Pastor Roger H. Black**

February 3, 2019 – 4 Epiphany On the web at [www.bethel-madison.org](http://www.bethel-madison.org/)  
 312 Wisconsin Ave, Madison WI 53703

Theme: “God’s Love Overcomes Our Failure to

Love in the Community of Faith”

Human beings often have a problem with hearing words that we have heard so many times before that we don’t really comprehend them. For example, how many times have you heard the words of the Star-Spangled Banner sung:

**“Oh, say can you see by the dawn's early light, What so proudly we hailed at the twilight's last gleaming?** [ending with…. Whose broad stripes and bright stars through the perilous fight, O'er the ramparts we watched were so gallantly streaming?

And the rocket's red glare, the bombs bursting in air,

Gave proof through the night that our flag was still there.]

**Oh, say does that star-spangled banner yet wave**

**O'er the land of the free and the home of the brave?”**

We will hear those words sung tonight before the beginning of Super Bowl 53, but will we truly comprehend their meaning? Added to that there is the question whether we connect familiar words with their original settings or use words totally out of their original context. Sometimes, the misuse of words out of their setting even leads to humor. For example, from the time of my youth I have been a baseball fan of the Braves—first in Milwaukee and then in Atlanta. Whenever I sang the Star-Spangled Banner in my youth, I did not think of the freedom of a young nation being protected in the War of 1812—and the brave soldiers who protected that freedom. Instead, as a fan of the Milwaukee baseball team I would sing— “O’er the land of the free and the home of the Braves—as in Milwaukee Braves!

We have a very similar problem to this when we approach our text from 1 Corinthians for today. We have so often heard these words read at a wedding. Consequently, we think they only have to do with ideal love in committed couple relationships. It is alright to use these words that way, but they are originally written to specifically address the needs of a divided church at Corinth on the isthmus of Greece around 55 A.D. Still, these words can be applied to our lives in the church today. So, let us reflect upon 1 Corinthians 13 in the context of the body of Christ and consider what they mean for Bethel today. Ultimately, we will discover that. God’s love can overcome our failure to love others in our community of faith, and can even enable us to love one another, as Christ first loved us.

I. WE ARE CALLED TO LOVE ONE ANOTHER

IN THE COMMUNITY OF FAITH

“What does love have to do with the church? The church is made up of individuals in relationship to one other. So, we can apply love as a recipe for relationships. Jesus does this on several occasions when He says we ought to “love God with all your heart soul and mind” and “Love your neighbor as yourself.” Paul reflects this need to love our neighbors in how he deals with the church at Corinth. Paul wrote several letters to address the needs of a church that was in conflict over many issues. They were particularly arguing over whose gifts are greatest in the church. Is the greatest gift that of speaking in tongues or prophesying or something else? In chapters twelve through fourteen Paul responds to this argument by saying the greatest gift is to have the Holy Spirit working in you because “God’s various gifts are all important, because they are all from the Holy Spirit and are all to be used for the good of the whole community.

This brings Paul to the introduction to this chapter: “but strive for the greater gifts. And I will show you a still more excellent way.” What is this more excellent way? It is the way of love, but a particular kind of love. It is agape love. As so often is true, a little Greek can help us here. There are three words for love in the Greek language in which the New Testament was written. Paul chooses the most meaningful one—agape—other centered love or self-sacrificing love for what he considers greatest in the body of Christ. {Kenneth Foreman writes in The Layman’s Bible Commentary}: “The usual word for ‘love’ was a word that suggested physical sex desire and not much else—Eros- which survives in our English word erotic. There was a second word several shades brighter, but still a little pale, suggesting a kind of placid friendship. What was needed was a word that would express the Christian experience of the love of God himself, the love that is outpoured even on the loveless and the unlovable, the love that sent God’s Son to suffer and die with and for us…some word that would reflect the total un-self-seeking quality of God’s love and go far beyond the always partly, sometimes wholly, selfish desire that often goes by the name of love. Agape—Christian love, God-like love.” That is the kind of love we are to have.

In chapter 13 Paul has three different ways of emphasizing the necessity to love, in three sections of chapter 13. [Clarence Craig entitles these three: “The Superiority of Love, The Nature of Love, and The Permanence of Love.”] In the first section (verses 1-3) he emphasizes the intrinsic value of love over anything else in the body of Christ. It communicates itself to us as the one thing needed above all others to make life in the church work. We might express it in today’s language: “If I have got it all together, if I am the best speaker and the best preacher and the best teacher and the strongest faithful Christian, but don’t have love, it doesn’t mean nothing. I am bankrupt. I am like the creaking of a rusty gate.”

Another way to say it is that “only love matters.” In the movie City Slickers Billy Crystal plays Mitch Robbins, who goes on a cattle drive at a dude ranch with his friends, Phil and Ed. They meet Curly, played by Jack Palance, who is their guide and a bit of a sage. When "Curly" and Mitch are riding alone to round up some stray cattle. Curly declares that all the rest of the stuff in life "don't mean nothing" if you know the one thing that is the meaning of life. The Billy Crystal character asks what that one thing is. Curly tells him he must find that out for himself. In the movie that one thing turns out to be valuing his relationships. For Paul that one thing is love, that which is most clearly expressed in Jesus Christ. Reflect the love of God in Christ in our relationships at church, as well as everywhere else, and all the rest will fall into place. Only love matters!

II. WE ARE CALLED TO REFLECT CHRIST’S LOVE

IN OUR RELATIONSHIPS IN THE COMMUNTIY

How can we possibly love others like Christ loved us? Paul goes on to use some specific ways in which we can reflect love like the rays of the sun. In the second section—verses 4-7—Paul portrays fifteen characteristics that reflect the nature of this Christian love. [Take a look at the list itself in your bulletin] Among them are patience, kindness, lack of jealousy, humility, and grace. The list reflects for us what it means to emulate Christ in our lives – to be Christ-like. Since only Christ can do this completely, we can begin to reflect Christ’s love by setting high goals of following Him. We can pray for the Holy Spirit to guide us in our conversations with others in the community, and act as God would have us act.

How hard it is be patient and kind and humble and full of grace in life. It really comes down to showing love in the “nitty gritty everyday” of life. As I reflect on the fifteen characteristics of love, I find “love does not insist on its own way” to be the hardest for me. For like most people, I often want things to be done my way. Debi Walter writes, “I’m confident my way is best, and I struggle with letting go. Truth be told, what I’m really seeing inside my heart is the temper tantrum of a spoiled child competing for attention, wanting nothing more than for things to go MY WAY. In order to grow in loving this way it’s important to realize it is two-fold; I must not insist on my own way, but I must also embrace the way of another.  Love demands that I set aside my own agenda to serve another.” I should demonstrate my love for others in the community by {what Eugene Peterson says} a “love that isn’t always me-first.”

How does that play out in our relationships in congregations? You are at a team meeting and you share your idea of how things should go. Others express their own ideas, and in the discussion a consensus seems to be reached on a different way to approach it. Instead of getting mad and going away from the meeting trying to work the crowd to see that your way would have been best, you accept the will of the majority and get on board with that group approach. “Love isn’t always me-first.”

All the characteristics of love in the second section are hard for human beings to practice in our lives. The best we can do is to aim high to love and then thrown ourselves on the mercy of God when we fall short. One of the great theologians of this century, Karl Barth, confesses to a recurring dream. He sees himself arriving at the Pearly Gates pulling a child's red wagon in which were stacked all his writings. He believes the dream is telling him that in the final analysis, all his knowledge, all his theologizing, is mere child's play compared to God's great grace. {To rephrase a contemporary singer, Jewel] “In the end, only love matters.”

III. WE ARE CALLED TO LET GOD’S LOVE FLOW THROUGH

US, ESPECIALLY IN THE COMMUNITY OF FAITH

In the final part of our chapter, Paul emphasizes how our capability of perfect love is limited by our humanity. In the words of Eugene Peterson: “We know only a portion of the truth, and what we say about God is always incomplete….We don’t yet see things clearly. We’re squinting in a fog, peering through a mist.” How limited we are as human beings. We are even more limited in following Jesus’ command “to love one another as I have loved you.” Our best efforts to love one another may well be to hang on to Christ through our faith, hope and love. As Paul concludes: “But for right now, until that completeness, we have three things to do to lead us toward that consummation: Trust steadily in God, hope unswervingly, love extravagantly. And the best of the three is love.”

Why is love so important, even more important than faith or hope? Because it is agape love—self-sacrificing love. As Jesus says in John 15:13: “Greater love has on one than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends.” It is a love that puts others first just as God put us first.

How can we possibly begin to love like that? We can admit that God’s grace is the source of any goodness in us that without God we are nothing. Then we can receive His love with faith. {As theologian Emil Brunner put it}, “Faith is nothing but the openness of our heart to God's love. Faith is the instrument that opens us to God's love. It puts us in touch with the source of love itself. Faith allows us to draw from that source so that the love of God shown to us in Christ can also show itself in our lives.” Faith is that which enables us to overcome our immature ways and to begin to reflect the perfect love of God.

What is Paul saying to Bethel Lutheran Church and the larger church today? Let’s let love direct all our relationships and deliberations in the church. {Paul writes in 14:1} “Go after a life of love as if your life depended on it—because it does.” When we humbly try to let love direct our ways, then we will let go of differences in the past. Then we will begin to live in the present and the future as fellow members of the body of Christ. We will truly make the church together.

Let me close with a story about being the church together. {Pastor James Hewett tells the story of a Vacation Bible School experience his wife had at their church. She} A woman was teaching a first grade (VBS) class. One Wednesday just before the end of the day a new student named Davey was brought in. Davey had one arm missing, and since the class was almost over, Mrs. Hewett had no opportunity to learn any of details about Davey. She was also very nervous and afraid that one of the children would comment on this boy’s handicap and embarrass him. So, she thought they should do a familiar activity together. “Let’s make our churches,” she said. “Here’s the church and here’s the steeple, open the doors and there’s…” At once the awful truth of her own actions struck her. This new boy would be unable to make the church with his one hand. The very thing that she had feared that the children would do, she had done. As she stood there speechless, the little girl sitting next to the boy reached over with her left hand and placed it up to his right hand and said, “Davey, let’s make the church together.”

This could well be a parable of our search for oneness in Christ: to put our inadequate, handicapped lives alongside the lives of others and to pray, ‘Let’s make the church together.’”

As we aim high to reflect the love of Christ, let us make the church together. Amen.