

## SCRIPTURE'S GREATEST HITS

### *It's All About Love*

1 Corinthians 13:1-13

July 23, 2023

What does God require of the Church? What are the responsibilities—the duties—of Christian disciples living in community?

As a second semester freshman in college twenty-two years ago, I had the opportunity to take a course on the life and letters of the Apostle Paul. The course was taught by E.P. Sanders, the professor who would become my academic advisor in the religion department. And it was one of those educational experiences that moved from the informative to the transformative, the beginning of a long journey with Paul's Letters, a journey that has been core to my call to ministry.

Professor Sanders, who died last November, was a legendary New Testament scholar and a brilliant teacher. Raised a Southern Baptist in Texas, he referred to himself as a "secularized Protestant." Our study of Paul was undertaken through the lens of historical critical study and academic rigor, not faith formation.

And yet, here's what happened. We were nearing the end of First Corinthians, and in a departure from his usual pedagogy, Professor Sanders began to read out loud from the thirteenth chapter. And, as he did, the words caught in his throat. He became noticeably, uncomfortably emotional. He paused before continuing. After finishing the chapter, he closed his Bible, looked up, and addressed the classroom of students before him, saying, "If Paul had written nothing else, his importance would be well-deserved." Class dismissed. It was a moment I will never forget.

What was it that struck him that day reading this passage of scripture?

If you are at all familiar with the thirteenth chapter of First Corinthians, chances are that's because of its common use as a reading at weddings. The poetic refrain, the beauty of the words, the emphasis on love, make it an obvious choice for such an occasion. But these verses have a context of their own. Paul was not a wedding poet. He was an apostle. He did not write for isolated couples but for whole communities. And so, in memory of Professor Sanders, I hope you'll permit me a few moments of exegetical extravagance this morning. Or perhaps better put, pure geekery.

First Corinthians is a letter addressed to a congregation filled with people Paul already knew. This is important. It's a church that Paul founded, a congregation he loved. It's also a church struggling to remember its identity. Though the specific topics raised in the letter are not those we might name as pressing, the core concern remains as timely as ever. It is this: the church has become bitterly divided. Paul, as any pastor would, urges unity. But the unity to which Paul calls the Corinthians is not a watered-down sameness that drains the substance from their convictions. It is a unity born of the conviction that the Church of Jesus Christ is one Church, that division disfigures Christ's body, prevents us from pursuing our purpose.

In the tenth chapter of the letter, Paul addresses the question about eating food from animals that have been sacrificed to idol gods. Now, this would have been an especially important matter in a city like Corinth. You see, many of those who had joined the Church, the Christian movement, had formerly worshiped and offered sacrifices to a wide variety of diverse gods. Some who had made this dramatic

theological shift from idol worship to the worship of God did not stop attending the festivals and feasts where meat sacrificed to idols was eaten. After all, what difference did it make? The idols are not really gods, and, by the way, the meat was delicious. It would have been a rare delicacy in the ancient world.

To eat meat offered to idols or not. That was the question.

Paul responds in an interesting way. He agrees with the premise of those who thought eating the meat was no big deal. He even quotes them. "All things are lawful." But that is far too low a bar for life in Christian community. And so, Paul continues, "All things are lawful, but not all things are beneficial... not all things build up." And then, this zinger. I wish he hadn't written it, but he did. "Do not seek your own advantage, but that of the other." Ahhh...so it's not about the existence of idols or what's on the menu. It's about how we care for each other. If, by eating meat offered in idol sacrifice, you run the risk of leading others astray, you should refrain. Not because of the law, but because of love.

In chapter eleven, Paul returns to that core issue of division, and this time over worship. Did you know that congregations can become divided over worship? Well, it seems that the Corinthians have designed a kind of carefully arranged tiered approach to the celebration of the Lord's Supper. Here's how it worked: The wealthy and the prominent arrive early, where they enjoy their exclusive fellowship and the best meal without telling the others the start time. And then, when the rest of the community shows up, the good food is all gone. The early arrivers, well they are well-fed and, yes, a little tipsy. Paul is furious. What you are eating is not the Lord's Supper. Why not? Because Christ's table is for all. Paul directs the Corinthians, "When you come together to eat, wait for one another." If everyone is not welcome, you've missed the point.

In chapter twelve Paul beautifully describes the variety of spiritual gifts that exist in the Corinthian

community, each one given and activated by God. But Paul is aware that the church has given in to the temptation of ranking the gifts of the Spirit, creating a hierarchy of membership. In response, Paul employs his favorite image for the Church: "You are the body of Christ, and individually members of it." As with the human body, Paul writes, each part of our fellowship has a unique and indispensable role to play, a distinctive contribution to make. We need each other to be the community God intends us to be, just as our body needs all of its parts to function properly. But then Paul takes this one step further, moving from symbiotic coexistence to radical inclusion. Paul writes, "The members of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable." Paul writes, "God has so arranged the body, giving the greater honor to the inferior member."

Friends, consider this: that life in Christian community is not about equality—everybody getting the same thing. It is about compassion—those who need more should receive more. It's about going out of your way to lift another up. It's about making sacrifices to care for each other. Again, Paul has a pithy conclusion, writing, "If one member suffers, if any among you is suffering, all suffer together." Listen. Life in Christian community cannot be primarily about what is best for me. God requires more of us than that.

And so, chapter twelve ends with a promise. "I will show you a still more excellent way." These are the words that introduce the passage that brought my brilliant professor to the brink of tears.

Yes, the topic is love, but I'm convinced that, for Paul, love is always grounded in responsibility, sacrifice. Though the English translation unfortunately obscures this reality, in verses four through eight, love is the subject of sixteen consecutive verbs. When we set this passage in its context, we are able to hear something deeper than the syrupy sentimentality that has plagued this greatest hit from Paul. The love described here takes work. It's hard. It stretches us beyond our comfort zone and self-interest. Yes, to

a divided community of Christian believers, Paul commends the kind of love that is prepared to yield for the good of another, a love that does not insist on its own way, a love that practices patience and forgiveness, a love that never ends because it never stops pushing us toward that still more excellent way.

When all is said and done, we will be measured not by our accomplishments, titles achieved, positions held, or even our spiritual gifts. We will be measured by how well we have loved. Yes, when all is said and done, a church will not be measured by the size of its budget or the beauty of its building, the orthodoxy of its theology, or the purity of its people. We will be measured by how much of God's love we have poured back into the world. And so, it is more than a shame—it is a heresy—when congregations and denominations divide into factions that use scripture as a weapon in those battles.

It's all about love. A love that looks to the needs of others before our own. A love that challenges our preconceived notions. A love that values the image of God in each other more than any obsession over who is right and who is wrong. If Paul were writing today, I am convinced that while the topics may be different, the message would be the same. Love, love, love is what God requires of the Church.

When hate is loud, love must not be silent. When messages described as "Christian" only further the divisions among us, foster the resentment between us, or enable our judgement of one another, we cannot sit idly by or slip into vapid sentimentality. We must be clear that the love Paul commands looks first to the wellbeing of those on the outside. Clothed with greater honor. We must be clear, when there are voices spewing exclusion and hatred, that the voice of love says *no*. The grace of God extends to all, or it is not God's grace. The table of the Lord belongs to all, or it is not the Lord's table. And so must our message of welcome as a church. If our theology, if your theology, allows you to condemn any other while congratulating yourself, it is not Gospel.

Will you allow the love of God to break open the closed places in your heart? Will you embrace the responsibility of Christian love? Will you practice patience, seek reconciliation, extend compassion, walk with humility, pursue a still more excellent way? Friends, this is the ultimate measure of our faith. It is the core of our common call.

And so, please don't waste your life on anything less. You will regret it when your days come to an end.

It's all about love. Love God. Love one another.

It's all about love. In words and in actions.

It's all about love. Love one another. Not some, but all.

It's all about love. Love one another. That's what God requires of us.

Paul was right. Without love, we are nothing. Amen