

“How Deep Is Your Love?”

Several weeks ago we installed our church officers and committee and team members. These are the people who will make decisions for our church for the next year and do the work of the church. Much prayer and thought has gone into making sure that the right persons are in the right positions. We have great expectations for what they can do. In today’s sermon, we look at 1 Corinthians 13 as the Apostle Paul continues his discussion on how a group works together.

A number of us have served on boards and committees in the past. We know that there are several things which must happen if positive results are to happen. First, the various members must work for the common good of the organization, whether it is a church or secular board. If members work for their own self advancement, then the board or committee will ultimately fail. The board cannot reach its goals if it exists only to serve one or two members who bully or control the others.

Second, the board or council must recognize that the gifts and talents of each member are equally important. There should not be a bias in favor of those who appear to have greater gifts. To create levels of status in an organization ultimately works against it operating effectively for its common goals.

Third, the board or council must be willing to use the gifts of each member of the organization. Even if it is recognized that all gifts are important, but some are not used, then the corporate body does not reach its potential. As Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 12, we have to remember that each part of the body, no matter how insignificant it might appear, has a function and cannot be ignored. Though the head may appear so important, the pinkie finger has an important function as well.

In 1 Corinthians 13, Paul establishes that love is the indispensable ingredient or condition of the faithful Christian life. This particular passage is often used at marriage ceremonies and is often used to refer to romantic love. It has application to marriage relationships but its true meaning is how Christians relate to each other in all relationships, especially as they deal with each other as fellow Christians.

In 1 Corinthians 12 Paul sets out how the Corinthians needed to value each person's gifts and how certain gifts are not to be viewed as greater than the others. He knows, though, that the Corinthians, consumed with status as much as they were, needed to understand the true virtue of the Christian faith so that they could work together. Just telling them to respect each other's gifts is not enough.

Paul writes of his own gifts, which the Corinthians knew. He then makes a devastating declaration to them. He says that, despite these gifts, if I do not have love, "I am nothing" (v.2). This had to have an impact on his hearers. The

Corinthians had centered around Paul as a positive example worthy of emulation.

Paul is smart in how he addresses them about love. By offering himself as an example, he can make a warning to them without offending them.

Paul is also smart in what gifts he addresses. He knew the Corinthians favored status and many saw speaking in tongues as the great status gift. Paul writes that, without love, his speaking in tongues is like a clanging musical instrument. Nobody wants that in their church.

Second, Paul addresses a collection of gifts with which the Corinthians identified as important and gave one status. These are prophecy, understanding and wisdom. Without love, these gifts are nothing.

Third, Paul brings up two ways of gaining social notoriety and presumably status. These are the giving away of one's possessions and one dying for another. These appear to be such great sacrifices and virtues. Yet, Paul points out that without love, nothing is gained from these actions. Without love, these gifts become self-indulgent and self-serving. When love is not present, the exercise in question becomes vain, selfish and fruitless.

When we are dealing with other people, the proper movement of love begins with the attention to the needs of the other persons. This is how we are to work

together as fellow members of the church body. It is not “What’s in it for me?”

Rather, it is “What is best for you?” “What would help you?”

In vv. 4-7 Paul sets out the acts of love. Love is patient; love is kind; love puts up with all things. Love is the context in which the difficulties and trials of life are met. What we deal with in the church is not always easy. We do not deal with issues as individuals. Love always involves another; love always links one’s self to another. Love is a two-way street that provides a context of mutuality. Love enables us, with the support of others who are linked in love, to bear, to endure whatever comes along.

Love helps us deal with one another. There are times when our passion causes us to feel anger. There are times when others may raise our anger. But what we realize from Paul’s writings is that a message based in love is much easier to hear than one emanating from anger. Love bears all things, endures all things.

Love does not keep a record of complaints. The very capacity to overlook, not to keep score, is vitally important to the functioning of love. One may ask how this is possible. It is because love is the one disposition that believers share most fully with God. The love celebrated in this text comes from God, claims us, and reaches out to others. True love always begins with God and always reaches beyond one’s self to others.

We read that love hopes all things. To hope all things must be grounded in this confidence in God toward the future, a confidence whose basis is not visible. On the theological level, “walking by faith” describes a way of living in trust upon the God who is “for us” as we read in Romans 8:31.

Finally, we must comprehend that love is eternal. Love never ends because God’s eternal love is the ground and matrix for all human loving. Unlike the gifts favored by the Corinthians, love will go on for eternity. Prophecies will be brought to an end. Tongues will stop. Knowledge will be brought to an end. Gifts are finite. The love that comes from God goes into an infinite future.

So, as we work together, let us remember that it is the love that originates from God that works through us and reaches out to others that helps us deal with issues while functioning as the body of Christ. We cannot do it on our own. If we do not have love in our actions, then we receive no benefit whatsoever. The love of God which works through us is eternal in its existence.

In closing, let us recognize Paul’s vision in 1 Corinthians 13. Paul’s vision stretches from his recognition that all believers are somehow on a pilgrimage from being children in the faith to the time when maturity or perfection arrives. Paul offers himself as the model of the person who is no longer a child. He is the one who will mature and come to full knowledge as he puts aside childish things. He

will do this as he allows God's love to work in his life. You, too, will mature in
your Christian faith as you choose to allow God's love to work in your life.