

THE GREATEST OF THESE IS LOVE

(1 Corinthians 13:1-13)

Intro: One of the key principles of good Biblical interpretation.

- We understand the context for the text.
 - #Historical setting.
 - *Time.
 - *Place.
 - *Purpose.
 - *Original audience.
 - +For which it was written.
 - #Surrounding Scriptures.
 - *In which a particular text is imbedded.
- We don't simply:
 - #Lift isolated passages out of their context.
 - #Try to interpret them in isolation:
 - *From the surrounding Scripture.
 - *From the historical context.
 - +In which they were written.

But principles of Biblical interpretation get violated all the time.

- Because:
 - #We don't know any better.
 - #We forget.
 - #We're lazy.
 - #We have a preconceived notion.
 - *What the text ought to mean.
 - +Here.
 - +Now.
- 1 Corinthians 13 is a classic example.
 - #Text which gets lifted out of its context.
 - *All the time.
 - #1 Corinthians 13 is a popular text for:
 - *Weddings.
 - *Wedding anniversaries.
 - *Marriage.
 - +Because it speaks about love.
 - =Godly love.
 - #I've used it for:
 - *Weddings.
 - *Wedding anniversaries.
 - +Because it speaks about love.

- But in its original context.
 - #1 Corinthians 13 has nothing to do with:
 - *Marriage.
 - *Weddings.
 - #It is about all the gifts of the Holy Spirit.

I. Let's Look At The Context Of 1 Corinthians 13.

A. 1 Corinthians 13 Falls Between 1 Corinthians 12 And 1 Corinthians 14.

1. If you have:
 - a. Been here the last couple of Sundays.
 - b. Not been totally comatose.
2. You may remember that we have had two readings from 1 Corinthians 12.
 - a. 1 Corinthians 12: 1-11.
 - Holy Spirit gives different gifts.
 - #To different people.
 - #For the common good.
 - b. 1 Corinthians 12: 12-31a.
 - We are the Body of Christ.
 - #We're not all the same.
 - #But we're interconnected.
 - #We need each other.
3. Then St. Paul says:
 - a. "Strive for the greater gifts."
 - b. "Let me show you a more excellent way."
 - 1 Corinthians 12:31.
4. Then St. Paul begins to talk about love.
 - a. 1 Corinthians 13.
 - b. In the context of gifts from the Holy Spirit.
5. 1 Corinthians 14.
 - a. Not an appointed reading for our Sunday lessons.
 - b. But it continues the theme of gifts from the Holy Spirit.
 - Speaking in tongues.
 - #Private prayer language between you and God.
 - Interpretation of tongues.
 - #If someone has the gift of speaking in tongues.
 - #You had better pray:
 - *Someone has the gift of interpretation of tongues.
 - =Or it will be of no value to a larger group.
6. It is in this context.
 - a. St. Paul talks about love.
 - b. 1 Corinthians 13.

- B. Christians In Corinth Had A Problem With Their Gifts From The Holy Spirit.
1. They thought their gifts were better than other people's gifts.
 - a. "My gift's better than your gift."
 - b. "Nyah-nyah-nyah-nyah-nyah!"
 2. There were some who thought that speaking in tongues.
 - a. Greatest gift.
 - b. Not speaking:
 - Hebrew.
 - Spanish.
 - German.
 - c. But speaking in an ecstatic language.
 - For which there is no:
 - #Alphabet.
 - #Vocabulary.
 - #Dictionary.
 3. I have never spoken in tongues.
 - a. That's not my gift.
 - b. We Lutherans tend to be a little leery.
 - Of those who claim to have the gift of tongues.
 4. But I have encountered people who did have the gift of tongues.
 - a. St. Louis Regional Medical Center.
 - As the chaplain.
 - #I would:
 - *Make rounds on the floors.
 - *Talk with the patients.
 - *Listen to the patients.
 - *Try to respond appropriately.
 - +To take up concerns with:
 - =Medical staff.
 - =Social work department.
 - +To shape a prayer:
 - =Address their individual circumstances.
 - But there were a couple of volunteers in the hospital.
 - #Not working out of the chaplain's office.
 - *But out of the volunteer office.
 - #From a Pentecostal church.
 - *Who went from room to room.
 - +Not talking with the patients.
 - +Not listening to the patients.
 - *But:
 - +Grabbing the patients by the toes.
 - +Speaking in tongues.
 - +Moving on to the next:
 - =Bed. =Room.

#Hit and run prayer.

*I called it.

+Did it do any good?

=I don't know.

+Did it do any harm?

=Yes, sometimes.

#But these ladies felt so strongly about their "gift."

*They insisted on sharing it with everyone.

+Welcomed.

+Unwelcomed.

b. St. Louis County Jail.

-There were volunteers from Pentecostal churches.

#Who came into the jail.

#Who told the inmates:

*"If you don't speak in tongues,"

+ "There's something wrong with you."

+ "You're not saved."

= Their terminology.

= Not mine.

+ "You're not going to heaven."

#Gifts of the Holy Spirit.

*No longer gifts.

*But demands.

-I spent a lot of time.

#Picking up the pieces.

*After such groups.

#Reading with the jail residents.

*1 Corinthians 12.

*1 Corinthians 13.

*1 Corinthians 14.

5. That's what St. Paul was doing with the Christians in Corinth.

a. "If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels,"

-Human language.

-Ecstatic speech for which there is no:

#Alphabet.

#Vocabulary.

#Dictionary.

- "But do not have love,"

"I am: "

* "Noisy gong."

* "Clanging cymbal."

* Bag of hot air.

- b. "If I have prophetic powers,"
 - "And understand all mysteries and all knowledge,"
 - "If I have all faith,"
 - # "So as to remove mountains,"
 - "But do not have love,"
 - # "I am nothing."
 - c. "If I give away all of my possessions,"
 - "If I hand over my body so that I may boast,"
 - # Giving his life for the faith.
 - "But do not have love,"
 - # "I gain nothing."
6. Such thinking is childish.
- a. Paul says.
 - b. These other gifts:
 - Prophecies.
 - Tongues.
 - Knowledge.
 - # Are all going to disappear.
 - c. What endures:
 - Love.

II. How Do We Use The Gifts Of The Holy Spirit In A Loving Way?

A. Recognizing That There Is Only One Best Gift.

- 1. Love.
 - a. All of our other gifts.
 - Spiritual.
 - Material.
 - # Secondary.
 - b. If not used:
 - In a loving way.
 - For a loving purpose.
 - # Not so great.
- 2. Love is not:
 - a. Warm, fuzzy feeling.
 - "I love chocolate."
 - "I love Eileen Imwalle's apple pie."
 - # As great as these things might be.
 - # They are not the greatest gift.
 - * Chocolate.
 - * Apple pie.
 - + Don't last.
 - + Disappear.
 - = At least at my house.

- b. Hormone-driven desire.
 - If you watch TV or movies.
 - If a man meets an attractive woman.
 - If the man says:
 - #“I love you.”
 - #“I think I’m in love.”
 - *As:
 - +Wonderful.
 - +Powerful.
 - =As our sex drive is.
 - *This is not the greatest gift.
 - +Although it can seem that way sometimes.
 - +Although we try to make it that sometimes.
3. Love is:
- a. Attitude.
 - b. Action.
 - God’s attitude.
 - #Toward us.
 - God’s action.
 - #Toward us.
 - God loves us.
 - #Because:
 - *God is love.
 - +1 John 4:8.
 - *Love is God.
 - #Even when our sin leaves us:
 - *Unloving.
 - *Unlovely.
 - *Unlovable.
 - +God loves us.
 - =This is the greatest gift.
 - “God so loved the world,”
 - “That he gave his only Son,”
 - “So that everyone who believes in him”
 - “May not perish but have eternal life.”
 - #John 3:16.
 - *God loves us enough.
 - +To share a most precious gift.
 - =God’s only Son.
 - *Jesus loves us enough.
 - +To let go of a most precious gift.
 - =Life itself.
4. This is the greatest gift: Love—God’s love.

B. How Do We Reflect That Perfect Love?

1. Imperfectly.

a. Paul says:

-“Now we see in a mirror, dimly.”

#1 Corinthians 13:12.

b. Mirrors in ancient times.

-Not made out of glass.

-Made out of metal.

#If you’ve been to a museum.

*Exhibiting antiquities.

*You might have seen a piece of metal.

+Dull.

+Corroded.

=Underneath it in the display case the label:

-Mirror.

*We wonder:

+How could anybody see anything?

=In that kind of a mirror.

*We might as well be looking at ourselves.

+In the cover of the hymn book.

#If you’ve ever seen a jail mirror.

*Highly polished aluminum.

+Fixed to the wall.

*Even when it’s brand new.

+It may not be perfectly smooth.

=More like a mirror in:

-Amusement park.

-Fun house.

#Makes us look:

*Really fat.

=Really thin.

*Really short.

=Really tall.

*After awhile it becomes:

+Scratched.

+Dull.

*This is how we reflect God’s love.

+Imperfectly.

2. Imperfectly we recognize the Holy Spirit’s gifts.

a. In ourselves.

b. In others.

-Which may not be better than ours.

#Or worse.

#Only different.

- Which may not further our agenda.
 - #But are meant to further God's agenda.
 - *If we welcome newcomers to our community of faith.
 - +Only because of what we think they can do for us.
 - =Paying the bills.
 - =Serving on the altar guild.
 - =Helping with the yard work.
 - +We may miss the new thing God is doing.
 - =New gifts.
 - =Different gifts.
3. Imperfectly we recognize that sometimes true love is tough love.
- a. If you know someone who is:
 - Alcoholic.
 - Drug addict.
 - Chemically dependent.
 - #They ask you for money.
 - *Loving thing can be:
 - +To say "no."
 - +To plan an intervention.
 - +To get them into treatment.
 - #Love can be tough.
 - b. Jesus in the synagogue in Nazareth.
 - “All spoke well of him.”
 - #Luke 4: 22.
 - #Last Sunday's Gospel.
 - “All were filled with rage.”
 - #Luke 4: 28.
 - *Six verses later.
 - #Today's Gospel lesson.
 - *They wanted to throw him off a cliff.
 - +Luke 4: 29.
- What happened?
 - #Love happened.
 - #Tough love happened.
 - *Jesus reminded them:
 - +There could be no insider trading in the Kingdom of God.
 - =Claiming of special privileges.
 - Because they knew the home-town boy.
 - +Elijah and Elisha.
 - =Prophets in times of judgement.
 - =Prophets to outsiders.
 - Gentiles.
 - +Folks in Nazareth.
 - =Didn't have a corner on the love of God.

Concl: Let me conclude the way St. Paul concludes:
-“Now faith, hope, and love abide,”
#“These three;”
-“And the greatest of these is love.”
#1 Corinthians 13:13.

