

“The Excellent Way” – Pr Sprengle – Epiphany 4 – January 30, 2022

- I. **1 Corinthians (12:31b-13:13)** passage previously read.
- II. **Can you see it now?**
 - a. A bride and groom standing before the altar, looking at each other as the pastor reads this passage about love?
 - b. Only a few weddings I have officiated did not include 1 Corinthians chapter 13 as a part of the Bible readings.
 - c. When you hear the wonderful ways that love treats the other person, it seems like the perfect fit for two people who want to share their lives together...
 - i. ⁴ Love is patient and kind; love does not envy or boast; it is not arrogant ⁵ or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; ⁶ it does not rejoice at wrongdoing, but rejoices with the truth. ⁷ Love bears all things, believes [through] all things, hopes [through] all things, endures [through] all things.
 - ii. In fact, my premarital counseling sessions include having each person individually place their name wherever it says “love”.
 1. For example, my wife Michele is patient and kind; she does not envy or boast; she is not arrogant or rude. Michele does not insist on her own way; she is not irritable or resentful; she does not rejoice at wrongdoing, but rejoices with the truth. Michele bears all things, believes [through] all things, hopes [through] all things, endures [through] all things.
 - d. In that moment of sharing vows with each other – a soon-to-be-married couple means them from the bottom of their hearts.
 - e. But we all know that life happens...
 - i. Relationships become strained... sustaining a selfless attitude is difficult... and the godly ideals outlined in Paul’s letter are easier and easier to set aside.
 - f. Love is a tall order, mainly because we struggle with self.
 - g. As much as we want this passage to be about marriage, it’s a little out of context for a wedding ceremony.
- III. **Last week, Paul outlined spiritual gifts and serving in the Body of Christ.**
 - a. All of chapter 12 explains the importance of spiritual gifts and using them to build up others and glorify God
 - b. The people within the Corinthian church had so many problems with unity... with arrogance and pride... that they needed to hear about spiritual gifts as not just a way to make themselves look better... but for the common good of the body.
 - c. Paul moves on to the one thing that is underlying all these gifts and abilities – the “more excellent way” (vs 31) is LOVE.

- IV. **What is this kind of love that Paul calls the “excellent way”?**
- a. Society has many views of what love means...
 - i. Love is what I like...
 - ii. Love is romantic connection...
 - iii. Love is a friendly connection...or a family connection...
 - iv. Love is important to direct toward oneself...
 - 1. It’s interesting, but our kids are taught from a very young age to love themselves...
 - a. I remember giving a quiz in Confirmation class where I asked, “What are the two great commandments?” and they were to fill in the blanks.... One is to love _____... (God), and the second is to love _____.... (your neighbor).
 - b. A few students got the love God part, and some others put the second great commandment is to love yourself.
 - 2. I couldn’t fault them for all the messaging that young people get to love themselves for who they are and things like that, but is that what the Bible teaches?
 - b. The kind of love God creates in us is sacrificial...
 - i. This means that we are directing our love toward others rather than ourselves and our own best interests.
 - ii. Sacrificial love is not what I get in return... or about my needs, so much as it is about the other person and their needs.
 - c. This is hard to hear in a world that wants people to love themselves so they can have higher esteem – but we don’t need more love for ourselves – our entire psyche is built around self-protection, self-serving... self-seeking.
 - i. What I mean is that we have sin at the core of our being – a condition that we inherited from the first human beings... but also something that comes out of us in our thoughts, words, and actions.
 - ii. Martin Luther used a Latin phrase to describe the condition of our hearts – *incurvatus in se* – which means “turned in on itself”
 - 1. Sin has corrupted every heart – to the point that we don’t even know it, and we often need reminding.
 - 2. But the idea is that we have no trouble looking out for number one, or ourselves, because that’s the way we are wired.
 - d. The trouble comes when this sin even corrupts our love –
 - i. As much as we love our kids, we still sometimes act selfishly toward them... or selfishly want them to succeed for our own benefit and ego
 - ii. As much as a man might love his parents, he may have a hard time not thinking about the day when he receives an inheritance

- iii. As much as a man loves his wife, or vice versa, they might consistently look for ways to get “free” time or spend time away from the person.
- iv. We might not even see how our love is corrupted, but it always goes back to sin and the self.
- e. As I said, we often deny that we are more in love with ourselves than caring for others and God, but we all must face the reality of sin in us.

V. **Sin and its curse could only be overcome by the love of God in Christ.**

- a. 1 John 4:9 says, “In this the love of God was made manifest among us, that God sent His only Son into the world, so that we might live through Him.”
- b. The turn of events came when Jesus entered the world as a little child.
 - i. This was an act of pure love – as God Himself became a human being and walked among us.
 - ii. In our sinful condition, not one of us could come to God or save ourselves without some kind of outside intervention.
 - iii. And yet the Christ, the Savior who spent time in our shoes, gave up His own life to show His love for us.
- c. Dying for the salvation of many, Jesus paid the ultimate price for our broken, sinful hearts.
- d. And by His death and resurrection, the Bible tells us that He would send a Helper – one more piece of the equation to save us – The Holy Spirit.
 - i. In John 14, Jesus says, “¹⁵ If you love Me, you will keep My commandments. ¹⁶ And I will ask the Father, and He will give you another Helper, to be with you forever, ¹⁷ even the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees Him nor knows Him. You know Him, for He dwells with you and will be in you.” (John 14:15-17)
- a. Through the power of the Holy Spirit who dwells in us we have faith... which means we are all able to love in a selfless, sacrificial way.

VI. **That my friends, is what Paul wants all of us to understand...**

- a. We no longer sit in the bondage of sin and a hardened heart because the Holy Spirit resides in us by the work of Christ
- b. Our lives are able to reflect this love that God gave to us – we can live in a way that puts others first, or at least gives them the same status that we afford ourselves.
- c. What kind of a world might that look like?
 - i. Imagine a place where everyone looked to the needs of others before their own?
 - ii. Envision the blessings of marriage where the husband and wife truly lived a sacrificial life for each other as God outlines in Scripture?
 - 1. Think of how the children come through a marriage and upbringing like that...

- iii. Consider the Church with each person seeking the best for the Body of Christ.
- d. We have all been given a tremendous gift – the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord (Romans 8:39)
 - i. As we live in Christ's love, we are embracing the "excellent way"
 - ii. Always remember, "We love because He first loved us" (1 John 4:19)
Amen.