

I need this passage more than ever in my ministry. I am deeply disappointed with some of the trends in our country and at a loss about what to do. It is not so much that my team lost; instead, I feel we are so divided and have ceased to communicate. The issue is how we rip into those things and people we oppose and how this keeps us from staying focused on God's will. What do we do in a time like this? What can we do, and what should I do?

In the sentence that precedes our text for today, Paul says. "I will show you a more excellent way." And that is found in today's passage, which points through these divisions to a time of respect and civility.

Listen to this better way.

1 Corinthians 13:1-13

¹If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. ²And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. ³If I give away all my possessions, and if I hand over my body so that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing.

⁴Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant ⁵or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; ⁶it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. ⁷It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

⁸**Love never ends.** But as for prophecies, they will come to an end; as for tongues, they will cease; as for knowledge, it will come to an end. ⁹For we know only in part, and we prophesy only in part; ¹⁰but when the complete comes, the partial will come to an end. ¹¹When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child; when I became an adult, I put an end to childish ways. ¹²For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known. ¹³And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and **the greatest of these is love.**

The background for this beautiful ode to love is the odious behavior of the Corinthian Church. They were fighting over who had the greatest gifts, who was right, and who was inferior. Is speaking in tongues greater than prophecy? Are teachers greater than the generous? Are martyrs above all others? Who is most important, who is right, and who is wrong? Like Muhamed Ali, they shout, "I am the Greatest." "I am greater than you are, so there!"

Paul dismisses their boasting and arguments, saying essentially, all these gifts you are arguing about are rubbish if they are not undergirded with love. It was true for the Corinthians, and it is true for us. All we say, do and believe must be grounded in love to be God's will.

Paul says to all those disputing who is the greatest, "I will show you a more excellent way." And love is the most excellent way. Those acting in love are in harmony with God's will.

He shows us the way of love. Not in some generic or sentimental sense. Instead, a love that serves as the measure of all things. Any words, gifts, or acts not backed by love gain us nothing and can deceive us into believing we are serving God. We can depend on one truth: "We can't serve God without love."

Most of us are familiar with this passage as it is one of the best-known scriptures. Even if people can't tell you the chapter and verse or even which book it is in, they are familiar with it as it is part of many wedding ceremonies.

However, I am not sure that the couple, much less those in attendance, realize that this says more than they imagined. It is often chosen because it sounds inoffensive and mildly religious but inoffensive and speaks to some of the sweet romantic notions of love.

However, Paul speaks of so much more; he talks of a mature love. It is a love that is refined by the fire of putting it into practice daily in a life-long commitment to another after the flowers have wilted, the wedding garments no longer fit, and we have aged, but real love endures.

Although this passage was not designed for weddings, I can see how appropriate it is. Probably more than people imagine. It speaks of one of the hardest things to do: love sacrificially over time. It speaks about deeply caring for another you have come to know, warts and all. To love this way in one of life's most challenging and wonderful personal relationships or other similar life partnerships is what sacrificial divine love is all about.

How can this work? Love does not look at self-interest but at the best interest of the other. And in marriage, this can work because each person is seeking what is in the best interest of their life partner. It is not something we do alone.

Love like this undergirds strong relationships. But love can also be a rallying cry for our church, its leadership, and our membership. Can we do this? Listen to what we can do and be.

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wrong doing, but rejoices in the truth. ⁷It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. ⁸Love never ends.

Real love endures, and this love gives us our marching orders. For Paul, the sacrificial love of God revealed in Jesus Christ is the standard by which a church must measure itself.

This is vital today as we ordain and install new leaders in our congregation. It reminds them and all of us that what we do must be grounded in love.

I have read that one of the fastest ways for a church to grow is to find a hot-button social issue or two, oppose them, sometimes viciously, and preach against them, and the people who represent this position, for it is so easy to be against something.

But it is not so for us. We are called even when it is challenging to be for something to be for living a life based on sacrificial love. And our leaders are called to guide us in this kind of life.

Does this mean that we are not to address societal ills? Of course, we can and we should. But in doing this, we must differentiate between policies, positions, and people. We can vigorously oppose trends we see as harmful while doing our best to express ourselves in ways that show respect for others who differ from us. This could be the glue that helps mend our fractured society.

You know I attempt to use social media to build up our church and find humor in life. If you had asked me a year ago, I would have said social media can't get any worse. Well, it could, and it did, and it is.

Recently, not an atypical conversation on Facebook started with someone accusing the other side of being idiots and worse. Of course, this prompted a heated response from others with the opposite opinion. And it went from bad to worse.

Many people are saying things on social media that they would never have said in person in the past. But nowadays, people have forgotten their filters. But even more, they have forgotten that all people are in the image of God, and we are to love them.

So, the next time social media incenses, you ask yourself, "Is my response offered in love?"

So, from time to time, in these tumultuous times, you may be upset by some of the positions I take, and I do not want to do that on purpose. But I promise to try to make sure that the positions I support and espouse are based on the sacrificial love of God revealed in Jesus Christ.

My favorite Jimmy Buffett song, Southern Cross, has the phrase, "Love can endure, and you know it will."

Love knows no end as it is anchored in God. Keeping our hearts and minds focused on love can help us live the way God created us. And I need that now more than ever.