

In One Accord

1 Corinthians 12:31b—13:13

Epiphany 4; Series C

The anthem that the choir sang this morning was beautiful, was it not? (Address the choir director) “Elaine, do you think that the choir could sing a few lines of something more for us, please?” (The choir sings a few lines of something while a few of the singers are *obviously* off pitch and too loud.) (Address the choir director and the choir) “Well, maybe you all would like to give that a second try; it sounded a little . . . different.” (The choir sings the same few lines a second time *obviously* with the right pitch and volume.) “Now, that sounded much more pleasant!”

The Apostle Paul compares the Church to a body in his first letter to the Corinthians and says, “For the body does not consist of one member but of many . . . If all were a single member, where would the body be? As it is, there are many parts, yet one body” (1 Cor 12:14, 19-20). It was my intention to begin the sermon this morning by demonstrating the same truth using our chancel choir. For the choir does not consist of one member but of many . . . If all were a single member, where would the choir be? As it is, there are many parts, yet one choir.

We observed what happens when one member of a choir functions out of sync with the others. The choir does not function properly. The result is not a beautiful sound but a distorted noise. There is disharmony rather than harmony and it can be very unpleasant for our ears.

The problem in the Corinthian Christian Church was similar. Individual members of the body of Christ were acting individualistically, with no regard for the body to which they were attached. They were self-serving rather than self-sacrificing. In many ways, the problems in Corinth were the result of a series of failures to live out the self-sacrificial love of Christ that the Corinthian Christians received in their baptism. They were instead insisting on their own way. They insisted on their own way in matters of food that was sacrificed to false gods and goddesses (10:24, 33). They insisted on their own way in matters of sexuality (5:1-13; 6:12-20). They insisted on pursuing their own self-interests by hastily filing lawsuits against one another (6:1-11). They were rushing ahead with the Lord’s Supper or “hosting” it insensitively (11:21-22). They were interrupting speakers to proclaim sudden revelations or they were speaking too long at the expense of listening to others (14:29-33). All of these kinds of actions treated the other person not as a *person* but as an *object* to serve the self. Self-serving love was grounding and driving their behavior. As a result, the whole body of Christ, the Corinthian Church, was dysfunctional.

To this dysfunctional body of Christ, driven by the self-serving love of its members, Paul writes chapter 13 of his first letter to the Corinthians. In the thirteen verses of this chapter, the Apostle sings the melodious tune of the harmonious self-sacrificing love of God in Christ. He claims that the love of God in Christ is the kind of love that ought to be grounding the Corinthian Christian Church as well as the

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various relationships that its members have both inside and outside of the Church. This is a love that bears good fruit.

In chapters twelve and fourteen, the two chapters surrounding the great chapter of love, Paul speaks to the Corinthian Christians about individual spiritual gifts. He tells them that the Holy Spirit makes itself known among them through a variety of different gifts and talents. In these chapters Paul focuses on those gifts that were causing problems in the public worship life of the Church. Particularly, he discusses prophecy, healings, and speaking in tongues.

There is one couple I know that has taught this mantra to their children: “toys are tools.” Toys are tools used for playing with people. When these parents hear “give me that,” “no, it’s mine,” “he’s not sharing,” “she’s not playing fair,” then they require the recitation of the mantra: “toys are tools,” and they explain it again. It’s not the toys or the individual gifts, talents, or abilities themselves that are important, it’s *people* that are important.

In the case of children’s toys, they are just tools to help a brother play with his other brothers, sisters, and friends. When the toys become more important than people, when they get in the way of having fun with others or enjoying your play companion, then the toy turns tyrant, the plaything an oppressor, then the gift—against its intention and purpose—brings division instead of unity, discord instead of friendship, selfishness instead of sharing, conflict instead of community.

Paul understands the dangers of focusing too heavily on any kind of gift in a way that hurts the other person. He knows that it can create discord and disharmony that makes the body of Christ sound like a loud and noisy choir (13:1). This is why Paul takes time in chapter 13 to show the Corinthian Christians “the more excellent way” (12:31b) of the self-sacrificing love of God in Christ.

In chapter thirteen Paul describes this “more excellent way” of God’s love using a number of words and phrases. He says that it is “patient and kind”; it “does not envy or boast”; “it is not arrogant or rude”; “it does not insist on its own way”; “it is not irritable or resentful”; “it does not rejoice at wrongdoing, but rejoices with the truth”; it “loves all things, hopes all things, endures all things” (13:4-7). When this love dwells within an individual Christian and within the body of Christ, the fruitful possibilities seem endless.

Paul also says one more important thing about this selfless, self-sacrificing love of God. He says that it “never ends” (13:8). Self-serving love separates and divides. We can sift through the pages of Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians to see the damage it caused. Or we can see the mess that self-serving love makes of homes, families, and Christian congregations.

By its very nature self-serving love tears down the other for personal gain. This self-serving love made itself known in this world in such a way that it broke the body of Christ. But the love of Christ displayed on the cross was God’s self-sacrificing love for the whole world. This love, as Paul says, “never ends” (13:8). It endured every insult, every lash from the whip, every pierce from thorn, nail, and spear—every intentional and unintentional sin against God. It endured damnation and death. The love of God in Christ

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“endures all things” (13:7). But this love of God in Christ is also a conquering love. The love of Christ in the hours leading up to his final breath reminds me of a quote I once heard from Mahatma Ghandi, “First they ignore you, then they laugh at you, then they fight you, then you win.” On Friday and Saturday it seemed that God’s love in Christ would endure a bitter defeat. And then on Sunday it was clear to all that God had scored an eternal “win.” Then it was clear that our God’s love is a conquering love.

And now God has apportioned each one of his baptized believers with his Spirit that unites us not only to his self-sacrificing, enduring, conquering love, but also unites us to other brothers and sisters in the body of Christ who have received the same. What a melody we can make together when this love of our God is the center of our thoughts and actions. What harmony! There is something about music that is made when all members of a band, orchestra, bell choir, or chancel choir are working together. It sounds beautiful and is pleasing to hear and be around. The love of God in Christ, like good harmony, attracts others. Amen.