

Sermon – 4th Epiphany
I Corinthians 13:1-13
February 3, 2019

“Put That Away!”

Let’s suppose there are these two leaders – government leaders. One of them is supposed to make an important speech, but the other, who is mad about something the first one said, doesn’t allow the speech to happen and uses her power to cancel it. So, the first leader gets mad and tells the other leader they can’t go on an important trip they’d planned – using his power to cancel it. So then both leaders are mad because their desire to do something they think they have the right (and prestige) to do is denied by someone who is supposed to be a partner in government seeking the overall good of the country but who are obviously not fans of one another or respecters of their unique role. Shortly after this a third government leader chimes in saying “*one childish act does not deserve another*” - or words to that effect.

Well, I know this scenario is hypothetical, but it serves us well in entering our lesson from I Corinthians. Many Christians in the Greek city of Corinth were “higher ups.” They were *not* used to being told they shouldn’t (or couldn’t) do something. They were successful in business, intellectually refined, well connected in government, and probably, though I have no actual confirmation of this – athletic and good looking! And that was *before* they became Christians. When that occurred, God lavished on them, or some of them at least, “*gifts of the Spirit*” - most importantly and conspicuously the gift of “*glosilea*” also known as “tongues/heavenly speech.”

But not all was well in Corinth – they’d discovered that if you pair a spiritual gift and a sinner you’ve a recipe for spiritual pride – and it wouldn’t have taken much to stoke the pride of a Corinthian Christian. So, the gift of tongues, faith that inspired extraordinary charity in some and in others the ability to speak eloquently the message of salvation in Jesus just about did the Corinthian church in. Paul in I Corinthians 12 initiated a clear eyed discussion about spiritual gifts and a better way to use them *in* the church. In chapter 13 he makes an appeal to try “*a still more excellent way*” to *be* the church.

He aims at something the Corinthians valued highly – you might even say loved - their gift of heavenly speech. By way of critique, character, and finally contrast, Paul steers them toward a different gift of God - “*agape*”, which means “*the way God loves*”, the “*still more excellent way*.” In verses 1-3 he says tongues are like “*a noisy gong or clanging symbol*” – a reference to a device used in Greek theaters to amplify actor’s voices and the wild worship of a Greek cult. Not terribly flattering but it was forceful – Christian speech shouldn’t be loud and haphazard – but purposeful. Preaching that could take your breath away leaving listeners awed but unenlightened is no better, nor is charity that’s large and loud but doesn’t love its object.

They didn’t “*love the way God loves*.” Verses 4-7 then describe the character of “*agape*” by telling us what it is – and isn’t. In our world today “love” can mean just about anything – but the church defines it as the very character of He who initiated all the loving – who in Jesus truly

does “bear, believe, hope and endure all things” – endlessly.

Finally, verses 8-12 are dominated by two words “now and then” – reminding us that even our best traits are stranded in the “here and now” and will all “cease, be stilled, and pass away.” Then Paul includes a bit of a scolding – by saying that among believers fretting over ‘who can and gets to do what and why I don’t like them for it’ must be “put away.” Love is patient and kind and therefore modest and unassuming.

Love like this is no mere sentiment by the way – it has the capacity to keep someone from treating others “childishly.” The Greek word translated as ‘put away’ (*Katargeo*) meant “to render inoperative or cause a person to be free from something that has been binding him.” It’s a strong word, because attitudes and the behavior they motivate like pouting, picking a fight, or withdrawing don’t fall away by themselves like dead leaves from a tree. They can only be “agaped” out of us through Christ – acknowledging that the person you’d love to tee up and take a whack at has also been “loved the way God loves.”

Set aside for a moment my hypothetical illustration of two government leaders, and go with me to a hypothetical home. Both parents work all day. Mom picks up the kids at the sitter then stops at the grocery store on the way home. She’s exhausted. But so is dad – who goes to work every morning at 7. As mom walks in the door, she sees dad sitting on the couch watching ESPN. I know a lot of wives can’t understand why guys like to sit and watch a football game for three hours (you know what happens today at 5:40 PM right ladies?) But men can’t understand why women like to watch TV shows like “*The Two of Us*” either. “*Why sniffle over the imaginary woes of people you’ve never met*” goes the thinking. The clever response might be “*for the same reason you scream when a man you never met drops a touchdown pass.*”

Anyhow, the wife is hoping the husband will get up from the couch and offer to help her carry in the groceries or the kids. He’s waiting for her to notice he got supper started and thank him. Tired wife is hurt and feels like he doesn’t care. Tired husband feels unappreciated and like she doesn’t care. *If I run all over town...if I get home early and make dinner...and have not love...* So a few zingers are exchanged which has the unintended consequence of at least making for a ‘quiet dinner at home.’ *If I speak in the tongues of tired moms and dads...but have not love...*

This is what Paul is addressing with ‘when I was a child, I spoke and thought and acted like a child. But now that I am a man or woman’, I’d need to “*put that away – render it inoperative, turn off the switch*’. But Paul only does so only after reminding said believers and moms and dads how they’ve been gifted – “agaped” – loved like God loves. Speech matters. Recall, there was once a man whose speech healed and made demons flee. I’m sure you know him. I know he knows you, and “*loves you like only God loves.*” AMEN