

AND I WILL SHOW YOU A STILL MORE EXCELLENT WAY; 1 CORINTHIANS 13: 1-13; JANUARY 31, 2016; A. CAMERON AIRHART; WESTMINSTER PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

Currently in Buffalo, the *Road Less Traveled Theatre* is presenting *Freud's Last Session*, a play about an imagined encounter in London in September 1939 between the then-famous Sigmund Freud and a young medieval literature professor C.S. Lewis, who was just making a name for himself as a scholar and apologist. The play covers the big questions of life, and like all good plays about ideas, it presents those ideas wrapped around the engaging and humane personalities of the two characters. The two interlocutors disagree about many things, but their respect-filled human encounter, full of a dignity that transcends their differences, illustrates, in an unexpected way, a truth contained in our scripture reading today: that the greatest of these is love.

Is it odd to talk about a quality of a conversation between Sigmund Freud and C.S. Lewis as exemplifying what St. Paul meant by love in 1 Cor. 13: 1-13? It certainly is in American popular culture; for we have reduced love to romantic love. Most people hear 1 Cor. 13 read in church during a wedding, while the bride and groom are gazing into each others' eyes, and certainly Sigmund Freud himself contributed to our cultural assumption that *Eros* equals love. That we have become such captives to romantic love is a tribute to the power that Freud's ideas still exert in western culture. This narrowing of the definition of love to romantic love makes 1 Cor. 13 exceedingly hard for us to understand, for can we even imagine another kind of love?

We can, but we need help. For me, that help came from C.S. Lewis himself, who, in the greatest piece of scholarship in medieval literature in the twentieth century, *The Allegory of Love*, showed that romantic love as an idea had its western beginnings in the twelfth century, that is, twelve centuries after St. Paul wrote his letter to the church in Corinth. Since its twelfth century beginnings in troubadour literature, romantic love has pushed out older ideas about love and literally conquered the world. And a good lot of harm has come from its domination. The extent of the damage was brought home to me in 2001 when I heard Debbie Boone sing *You Light Up my Life*, with its quintessential line, *It can't be wrong, when it feels so right*. In this line, you have encapsulated what is wrong with our modern idea of love: that it is essentially a subjective, disembodied feeling that trumps the concrete and always embodied demands of truth and justice. (As an aside, although I did like the Carly Simon song Garrett picked two weeks ago for the choir, I am really hoping that he avoids Debbie Boone.) The gift Lewis gave us in his 1936 *Allegory of Love* was the knowledge that our cultural understanding of love's essence is not embedded in nature, but is just a cultural idea, from which we can be liberated.

If you come to 1 Cor. 13: 1-13 with a Debbie Boone mentality, you find yourself emotionally moved by the abstract words about love: love is patient, love is kind, love bears all things, endures all things, love never ends. To your modern ears, St. Paul's words seem more designed to seduce than to instruct.

But if you choose to be liberated from cultural conventions, you can drop your modern presuppositions and encounter afresh 1 Cor. 13 in Buffalo NY in 2016?

Here's how.

First, the hard work of concrete context. This is a letter to people living in the city of Corinth around 50 AD. Corinth was an old, rich Greek city that for 500 years had rivaled Athens. But it was different than other Greek cities, for in 146 BC it had been destroyed by the Romans and only revived as a veterans colony by Julius Caesar around 50 BC. Into it had poured immigrants from all over the Mediterranean, so it was really a new city with an old name, full of diverse cultures, languages and religions, held together by the political might of Rome and the economic entanglements of the empire. Sound familiar, Buffalonians? A new city, full of immigrants, cultures, languages, held together and made rich by commerce and manufacturing. We and Paul's audience are very much alike.

Into this dynamism, Paul brought the gospel of Jesus, newly liberated from its Jewish roots and let loose on the whole world. And in Corinth you can see the risks of bringing Jesus' words to groups of people who lacked the Jewish context of their meaning. Different groups in Corinth—cultural, economic, ethnic—understood the gospel differently, and just as Jewish Christians wanted to make Jesus their own, so these new Gentile Christians, not one gentile group but many gentile groups, wanted to make Jesus their own, too. The result? Instant diversity, instant controversy, all made worse by linguistic differences. What was Paul to do? Imagine the mess!

If you reread last week's scripture passage, 1 Cor. 12, in this context, then you get a different sense about Paul's metaphor of one body with many members. Rather than seeing it as a lovely image of health, you can see it as a desperate move by Paul to help new Christians appreciate other new Christians—indeed, to get these diverse people, who shared little in common past faith in Jesus, to even fellowship with each other at all. His plea was that they all needed each other for health, that each of their individual practices and expressions of the gospel were inadequate in isolation. Only together do they make the new community Paul was seeking to create. And this was a hard message, for after all, who wants to be told that your way of doing things, so meaningful to you, is not a complete expression of the gospel. I can imagine each group thinking, "Our way of worshipping, our way of teaching, our devotional methods sure feel like the whole gospel to us." And I can imagine each group saying these thoughts out loud, and in the process angering and alienating others.

Paul knew this, and he knew that his nice metaphor about the body in 1 Cor. 12 was not convincing standing alone; it needed to be completed by a still more excellent way.

And we are now drawn into a remarkable argument. Paul began by insulting everyone in Corinth. He listed their points of diversity and their use of identity politics—speaking in tongues, prophesying the future, profound understanding, public witness, voluntary poverty, even faith itself, and called these things noisy gongs or tinkling cymbals --these were comedic images, and nobody likes to be made fun of. And now Paul turned the knife and the smile came off his face; he equated their different practices and ideas with nothingness itself, with negation, with black holes. His words are Dadaesque and he has gotten their attention. We, on the other hand, have domesticated these words, and have lost the sense of their power and their offense, and frankly, their terror. Can you try to recapture the original offense of Paul's words by finding things you hold dear, maybe things that even shape your personal identity, in the list Paul gave? And if you can identify things you hold dear, are you offended when Paul calls these things "nothing?"

Having attacked the basis for our personal self-righteousness, Paul now describes the characteristics of love. He substitutes love for all the practices and beliefs he has enumerated, making the activity of loving the supreme mark of the Christian and the Christian community. And Paul's love is not interior, abstract, passive or inert. It is action, engagement, and movement. It is the constant struggle to remain in fellowship and peace with other members of Christ's coming-into-being pan-cultural family. This is one of the meanings of verse 8, "Love never ends." We are never finished with loving; it is like a meeting with no adjournment. If this sounds like it might be exhausting, that's because it is. Ask a caregiver of an elderly parent, the parent of a disabled child, or even the youth minister of an urban church.

If loving is so hard, then how are we to continue in loving instead of falling back on our comfortable ideas and cultural identities? It's not obvious, but here are some ideas.

First, Paul argues we have no choice. Paul shows us we must persevere in love because "Love never ends." He means that the community formed by love is permanent, that is, eternal. All other bases for the blessed community, no matter how comfortable, are temporary and will pass away, because they are all incomplete. In the future, Paul argues, we will consider our present beliefs and cultures as no more true than adults consider their previous childhood understandings to be true. To illustrate this point with a cute kids-say-the-darnedest-things story: Tuesday is Groundhog Day, and I am reminded of the time when Art Linkletter asked a four-year-old the meaning of Easter, and the child replied that Easter was the time when Jesus rose from the ground and looked around to try to find his shadow. Are some of my cherished, mature ideas going to look that silly when I see God? I think so. But it won't be because God has learned a thing or two between now and my death; God already knows what truth is in its

fullness, truth that I only glimpse darkly through a mirror, and ancient mirrors were dim indeed.

And here we arrive at Paul's second point: God is responsible for the world, not us. God knows right now what the full truth is, and He also knows the truth about you and me fully. And, still, He loves and accepts you and me fully, and he knows how different we are from each other. If the Creator and Sustainer of the universe knows in full what is happening, then I am delivered from trying to control the world, I am delivered from having to make right judgments about others and the world. That's what God is for. This is a tremendous burden to get off our backs, and frees us to love because we are not trying to control the future with our keen intellects or preferred cultures. This freedom even takes the anxiety out of judgment-making itself, for we know that the Lord of the Church will weave our decisions into the eternal pattern He is forming, a pattern that we see only dimly.

In Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, the prince comes to a transformative moment of clarity when he proclaims that "there's a divinity that shapes our ends, rough-hew them how we will." I read a story about a Shakespeare scholar traveling around Stratford in England, near where Shakespeare was raised, when he saw two farmers making a fence by pounding wooden stakes into the ground and then weaving thin branches around the stakes. He asked them what they were doing, and one farmer said, "He's rough-hewing the wood, and I'm shaping the ends." This side of heaven, our lives are spent rough-hewing the wood, and faith and hope teach us that God is shaping the ends. So relax, you're just called to love, and when you must judge, do it lightly because there's not as much at stake as you think.

But have I really answered how you can love without becoming weary? No, I haven't, so I need a third point. And here it is. The God who fully knows you has sent a Comforter, and He will abide with you forever. He, the Holy Spirit, is the Spirit of Truth, and if you want to experience His comfort and not just have an intellectual knowledge of comfort's existence, then make yourself available to God's Spirit. This weekend, the Women of Westminster have been doing just that, and the experience of Christians for two thousand years tells of the multiple ways God's Spirit can enliven us and enable us to persevere in love. But that's another sermon.

Amen