

Sermon by The Rev. Betsy Johns Roadman
Christ Church, Tarrytown, New York
January 31, 2016
Text: 1 Corinthians 13:1-13

When a Scripture text from one of Paul's many letters is read during a worship service, we usually introduce it with this format: "A reading from the Letter of Paul to ... (whomever he was writing)." A few minutes ago we heard, "A reading from the First Letter of Paul to the Corinthians." But when First Corinthians 13 is read, I so want to change that introduction. Given the context of where and how this passage of Scripture is most often heard in our culture, I wonder whether we should say this instead: "A reading from the First Letter of Paul to all the eager, radiant, excited, nervous, and infatuated couples on the occasion of their wedding." In my experience of officiating at and attending marriage ceremonies, First Corinthians 13 is, by far, the most popular Scripture passage read at weddings.

And why not? These are beautiful words, and who wouldn't want to affirm the intention of a life-long union rooted in love that is patient and kind; that is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude; that rejoices in the truth; that bears all things, believes all things, and hopes all things; that never ends. It's just that we've become so accustomed to associating this particular piece of Paul's writing with weddings and the romantic love of newlyweds that we forget that that was not at all what Paul had in mind when he was writing.

Paul was writing a letter to a group of Christians in the commercial city of Corinth – a bustling Greek trading port that, by Paul's time, had been colonized by the Romans. The believers in that faith community had been drawn together by Paul through his preaching of the Gospel, but there wasn't much else that these people had in common. They were Jews and Greeks, men and women, slaves and non-slaves. They were wealthy and poor, educated and not. But what otherwise would have separated them from each other – socially, economically, and politically – was irrelevant in their experience of the love of God as revealed in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, and the presence of God's ongoing Spirit in their lives. They were one in Christ, and because of that, they were one with each other. They were equal.

However, people being people, they found new ways of establishing hierarchies among themselves. For example, after Paul had left Corinth to continue his mission work elsewhere, the members of the Corinthian church began to disagree with each other about theological issues and their consequences for the community, as they worshipped and served together. Various spiritual gifts began to be exercised among them, for the building up of this community of faith. But because some spiritual gifts were considered to be more important or prestigious than were other spiritual gifts, the exercise of those "greater" gifts conferred enhanced status on the ones to whom those supposedly "greater" gifts had been given. And so what had been equal became yet another hierarchy – a spiritual

hierarchy - and separation from one another, and self-righteousness, jealousy, and resentment were the consequences.

Paul began receiving reports about the serious divisions that were happening within the Corinthian Church. He addressed this problem of the conflict about spiritual gifts in last week's reading from chapter 12. What Paul tried to communicate in that portion of his letter was that all of the gifts are equally essential for the health of the community, and that all of the members of the community are equally important to its functioning and ongoing life.

In the section of the letter that we heard today, Paul explains why this is true. Paul maintains that love is the most important reality of life in Christ. Love is what we're created for. Love is our reason for being. Love is what liberates us. Paul isn't saying that love is one of many spiritual gifts. Love is the core, the foundation, the very breath and life of the faith community.

And for Paul, love isn't about romantic feelings or cozy emotional affection, though either of those might be present.

And that's where this gets tricky. What does Paul mean by love?

My current favorite theologian, Richard Rohr, says that when Paul talks about God's love, he means "relationality itself, a dynamic, a process." He says that for Christians, "the Trinity is our template of all reality – God in relationship. God is the infinite, inclusive flow of giving and receiving." Rohr says that Paul sees God as "an event of communion."*

If we are created by and for God, in God's image, then we, too, are part of that dynamic, that process. At our very core is that infinite, inclusive flow of giving and receiving. Our purpose is living into that infinite, inclusive flow of giving and receiving. Our freedom, our saving grace, is participating in that infinite, inclusive flow of giving and receiving.

Some of you know that I co-pastor the Episcopal congregation at Bedford Hills Correctional Facility – a women's maximum security prison. When I enter the facility every Monday, my experience is pretty much the exact opposite of an infinite, inclusive flow of giving and receiving. There are hierarchies within hierarchies in the professional and social environment of the corrections officers and of the administration. There are hierarchies within hierarchies among the inmates. Overall, the system feels disconnected, yet clenched and constricted. It feels like a place where there's never enough (and if there is, it won't be shared equally). Our ministry team works hard to facilitate and model a very different way of being in relationship when we're there in the chapel on Mondays.

But this past Friday evening, for the first time, I experienced a facility-wide, inclusive flow of giving and receiving there, and it was glorious. An outside theater group had been working with some of the inmates for over a year to put on a production of the musical, "The Wiz." The show had been fraught with casting problems because of the constantly changing prison population. Just weeks before the first performance, the lead had been transferred to a different facility,

and another cast member had to step in. The rhythm that they'd established was disrupted. Some of the musical numbers had to be reworked. The night before the first show, there was very real concern that they couldn't pull it off. One of my parishioners who was on the stage crew said that the whole ensemble prayed together about it that evening – they were that desperate.

Everyone threw in together – staff, corrections officers, and inmates – to make this work, in a way that felt quite unusual for this institution. In the audience were dignitaries and people from the entertainment world, desperately hoping that these women would succeed - women who were in prison because they'd been convicted of committing violent crimes. As the main characters sang their solos, you could feel the encouragement of the audience, and of the corrections officers who were on duty that evening. After the standing ovation, state officials and professional actors mingled with the inmates and their proud families, and whatever hierarchies and social structures that would normally have separated one from another in that place, and on the outside, were temporarily gone. I thought, "This is what living out of abundance looks like. This is what it's like when we're one with each other."

As people of God, we've experienced that – though not nearly as often as we'd like. When we surrender ourselves into that infinite, inclusive flow of giving and receiving, we know that we're drawing upon divine abundance that, as Rohr says, "we can trust so much that, at least for awhile, we can live in a different way. "*"

Love is what we're created for. Love is our reason for being. Love is what liberates us.

May we live ever more fully in the love of God and of each other – in the divine infinite, inclusive flow of giving and receiving. Amen.

*Richard Rohr's Daily Meditations, *Our Foundation is Love*, December 27, 2015 (including video introduction)