

**The Greatest of These**  
**1 Corinthians 13**  
**January 31, 2010—Covenant Presbyterian**  
**The Revs. Catherine Robinson & Seth Finch**

We certainly can't talk about 1 Corinthians 13 without talking first about weddings. How many people think—or indeed, know for a fact—that this passage was read at your own wedding or at the wedding of someone near and dear to your heart? This is a good passage to read at weddings. It works very well.

I'm also surprised at how many families choose to have this passage read at funerals or memorial services. In fact, we read the first seven verses of 1 Corinthians 13 at Sally Sallee's memorial service last Thursday. Those of you who remember Sally will probably agree that it was a very fitting passage to read as we gave thanks for her life.

But it's important for us to realize that the original context for this passage was not a wedding or a memorial service. No indeed! The original context was... well... it was a church fight.

The folks at First Church Corinth were having some pretty serious problems. Oh, it wasn't that *everything* was going wrong. In fact, Paul himself had told them that they didn't lack any gifts of the Spirit. This was an incredibly gifted church. But for all of their giftedness, the church was about to come apart at the seams. There were people, it turned out, who had joined *not* the church, but a particular preacher.

Some said that they belonged to Apollos, who had been their leader at one point. Some said that they belonged to Cephas. And some said that they belonged to Paul. So the members of the church were divided by their loyalties to different preachers.

And what's more—even communion had become divisive in Corinth. When this letter was written, the Lord's Supper was part potluck and part sacrament and some of the wealthier Christians would gather round and chow down before poorer Christians could join them at the table. So we've got faith fights and food fights going on in Corinth.

Yes, Corinth was a pretty divided place. It was a church of many beliefs and strong convictions and though they shared a belief in Christ, there were divided.

Now, it's a good thing that Christians have learned from the mistakes of the past and are never divided these days—right?!? I mean we, as Christians, wouldn't hold onto particular leaders and discount those in different camps, right? Those titles we give ourselves—Lutherans, Calvinists, Wesleyans—that has nothing to do with leaders that we have latched onto. Oh, and we all figured out how to do that communion thing the right way and when we gather at the table we all do it the same way and everyone is included right? Now as I glance around the sanctuary I am seeing a few skeptical glances. What—you think it might look a little different if we were to go down the street and join our Roman Catholic Brothers and Sisters. Surely, the one body of Christ is all united in belief and we would never let differences in our faith divide us right? But that is just the larger church—those denominations—at least we never believe differently here within Covenant Right? Oh—Judging from your looks I am guessing that isn't quite the case either.

Yes, unfortunately, faith and belief are very strong forces and we don't always agree on what those beliefs lead us to do, and often times that it becomes so much that we feel like we must stand divided. Though we proclaim we are saved by grace through Faith, we sometimes let the differences in faith get in the way of the grace. I suppose we

are just as guilty and just as divided as Corinth, which is why Paul's message in this passage is so important.

So, let's back up a second in the part of the letter that comes right before this famous passage on love, Paul talks about all of the wonderful gifts that the people in the church have. They have folks who can preach and pray and heal the sick—all sorts of wonderful gifts—not unlike Covenant. But then, at the very end of that section, Paul says, "I will show you a more excellent way." In other words, Paul says, now I'm going to talk to you about something that is even more important than being able to do all of these grand things that you can do—gifts of God though they are.

And then, off he goes with this glorious, poetic passage on love. Instead of going through the text, piece by piece, let me try to offer a quick summary. What Paul says is that love is a kind of active caring, in which the good of the other person—or the good of the other people— always comes first.

Love begins with God and always reaches beyond the self to others. Okay...all of that is a really tall order. And he's not done yet—yep, it gets better. Love doesn't say or do anything that will diminish someone else—whatever the context. Love isn't always "me first." It doesn't elbow its way to the front all of the time. Love isn't easily provoked. It doesn't fly off the handle. Love doesn't keep score. It doesn't hold onto a memory of how someone did something hurtful and then nourish that memory....and maybe even feed it a little something now and then. Love finds no reason to celebrate the downfall of someone else. Love originates with God and always reaches beyond the self, to others in this broken world.

So, how are y'all doing with all of that? Does anybody feel like they manage to love like that? 24/7? 365? I sure don't.

Well, the good news is that there is someone who did love like that—who does love like that—in fact, whose very nature, whose very being is pure love.

When Jesus was here among us, he showed us something about love that is so important, and so difficult to remember in our culture that thinks love is all about how you *feel*. Jesus showed us that love is something that you *do*. Love is not mushy gushy love songs and flowers and perfume. It's not a sweet poem on a greeting card. Love is something that you do. That is what we learned from Christ, and that is exactly the message Paul is trying to send to Corinth and to us, in this passage.

And I can think of few better stories to illustrate that than the story of Eboo Patel's ministry. You see, Eboo grew up as an Indian Muslim in America. As you can imagine, this was not always the most welcoming place to be someone like him, who had such a different faith than the majority of the people in this country.

For parts of his life he tried hiding it. During other times in his life, he let himself be swept up in the differences and could understand the call of some of the radical voices in this world. But gradually, he began to realize that these differences were important and that it was even more important that we learn to look past them and learn how to love. In a world with assassinations of religious leaders, bombings, and planes crashing into buildings all in the name of faith, Eboo Patel wanted to find a better way.

So he founded the Interfaith Youth Core. Eboo had come to understand that the best way to teach people who believed so differently from one another, how to start loving one another, was through doing. So along with the help of many friends he founded the Interfaith Youth Core by starting the Day of Interfaith Youth Service. You see most previous endeavors into interfaith relations had been led by trying to

get a bunch of adults into a room with a different group of adults where they would start trying to talk themselves to common ground, and inevitably things would stall over some point or another.

Eboo always wanted to know when the youth were going to get in on this. The response was usually something like, "Well let's wait until we have figured things out enough between us so that we know it's safe to get the kids involved." But Eboo understood that this is not the way to make progress. So he started getting youth groups together from other traditions and started **doing** service projects together. After all of these kids started **doing** these projects together and the most astounding thing happened—they started talking to each other. There was something interesting that developed in these conversations. Rather, than starting from an adversarial place like so many of the adult interfaith conversations, they started in a place of love. They were showing respect to each other. They were sticking up for each other. And it started to bleed over into other parts of their lives, until even their parents started to meet one another and learned how to work with one another.

You see, these kids had already been practicing love together by **doing** things for others, and sure enough that love had bled into conversations of faith. Love had proved to be a far stronger uniter than the power of faith to divide.

In the years to follow, the Interfaith Youth Core would grow from being a small upstart organization on the south side of Chicago to being an international movement, and what's more—it continues to gain steam and transform lives. And it all started by doing rather than talking--by loving rather than believing.

Think about it. If all of these people from vastly different religions can begin a meaningful conversation in love born

out of doing rather than division born out of difference, imagine what might be accomplished within our churches, and our neighborhoods if we were to start from a place of doing; if we were to start from a place of loving.

That is one reason why mission is so important, it shows us how to love by **doing**. When we as a congregation are working with people from Dismas house, we are loving by doing. When we are feeding people through the Rio Grande Food Project, we are loving by doing. When we are rebuilding homes in New Orleans or Cedar Rapids, we are loving by doing, and what's more—we are loving people who may be completely different from us—belief doesn't matter in those instances. And we also receive the gift of love here—this church is a better church because we love others. We have greater love for each person within this congregation because of the things we have **done** together—because we have followed God's command to do unto others, because we have followed Christ's commandment to love one another, just as Christ Loved us.

That is what Paul is driving towards in this passage. "Faith, Hope and Love abide, but the greatest of these is love." You see, we are different. Even within the walls of this church we believe very different things, but our commandment is not to believe the same, our Commandment is to love. Love is the greatest of these three for a reason. It can transcend the differences of faith and belief, and only love has the power to instill hope within us.

And as we see from the Interfaith Youth Core, it all starts with doing something out of love. As we see from the example of our Lord and savior Jesus Christ, it all starts with doing love. That is who we are called to be and thanks be to God that we have been given the gifts of the Spirit to live into that calling to do love unto one another.

Amen.