

“The Church: Christ’s Love Made Real in the World”

September 30, 2018

Back to Basics series

Some of us just heard those words from I Corinthians 13 and thought of a wedding. Maybe it was our own or someone else’s, but the words about love in all its wonderful glory have been ascribed to weddings for a long time. It’s the hope we have for relationships - that people would embody that love with each other: patience, kindness, and so on.

Paul tells us what love should be, and he tells us what it shouldn’t be. And it’s probably easier to pick out examples of what love shouldn’t be than to lift up examples and celebrate what it should be in our present climate. I do want to give thanks for the celebration of a 60th anniversary in our church family today, which certainly is an example of steadfast love and faithfulness. Even so, divisiveness, deep pain, and infighting seem like they rule the day.

Sometimes people are surprised to hear that Paul’s letter isn’t written to newlyweds; it’s actually written to the early Christian community in Corinth. It’s a letter to the church! Right after Paul uses the body - and each body part - to describe each person’s importance within the church and how their spiritual gifts matter to the whole, he says, “You are the Body of Christ.”

We get a sense that there’s been some infighting about one spiritual gift or one particular role being more important than another. Some who have gifts of healing are telling people with gifts of serving that they’re not as important. Some who have prophetic powers are saying that they matter more than those who pray in tongues. There’s been some competition within the Christian community. Maybe you’ve experienced that in the church, or maybe not. But anytime we think our role is more important than someone else, we’ve lost the image of the church as all of us. And when that happens, we’re not remembering who we are as the Body.

We need each other as the Body of Christ. We cannot possibly function as well separately. All of the gifts that Paul lifts up exist in every church. We each have gifts to share in the Body, but we can’t do it alone.

And so Paul responds with this “more excellent way” of relating. Instead of competing about the gifts you have, think about who you are and whose you are. Think about the legacy you’ll leave. Even if you have spiritual gifts, they don’t mean anything without love as the motivation.

Paul lifts up love as the foundation of the Christian community. And as we’re talking about the basics of our faith today and what it means to be the church, we hear

that call to love. Love is how we're called to relate to God, to each other, and to the world.

So it's important to know that Paul is using *agape* as the word for love. The English language uses *love* to describe many things. I love coffee, and I love my husband, Ivan, but the type of love I describe for them is very different. The Greek language actually has four main words for *love*.

SHOW SLIDE: Four Greek words for **love**:

Eros (romantic love) - think "erotic"

Storge (family love) - the natural love of a parent for a child

Philia (brotherly love) - the love of friendship - think Philadelphia

Agape (God's divine love, sacrificial love) - selfless concern for others

Last week, we focused on the Holy Spirit - how the Spirit is God's active presence with us and God's active power in us. We have the power to be the church that was birthed on Pentecost and has continued to be the Body of Christ ever since. It's the Spirit that leads and guides us, and it's the Spirit that calls us into God's future.

Remember that the creed says "I believe in the holy catholic (universal) church..." right after affirming belief in the Holy Spirit. The church doesn't exist without the Spirit. Love is a fruit of the Spirit. And Paul exaggerates to get the point across to the people. We have gifts, but if we don't remember that love from God is what makes those gifts possible, if we don't respond to that agape love and share it, then the gifts don't matter.

God is love. God shows his love to us in Jesus, who commands us to love one another. We are the Body of Christ. And when we live into that image, the church is Christ's love made real in the world. We love because that's what grace really is - the unmerited love of God for us.

SHOW SLIDE: "Love God, love others" with arrows

This image is a helpful one to remind us of that connection.

Sometimes we get isolated and insulated talking about the church. Our thinking can be too limited - only about our local congregation or about our denomination. But Paul's call us to remember that we're connected to everyone around the world who seeks to follow Jesus Christ guided by the Holy Spirit. That's over 2 billion people worldwide!

And sometimes we think too narrowly - that the church is confined the time and space when we worship. It's a place we go or something that we do. The church is more than gathering in the name of Jesus. We have to hear the call of Jesus and live the ways of Jesus.

The church is who we are. Paul says it clearly: “You are the Body of Christ.” That’s both an incredible encouragement and a scary proposition! We love and serve for the sake of Jesus Christ. Bishop Will Willimon says, “The church is not supposed to make discipleship thrilling; it’s supposed to make it normal. We go to church to practice the faith...to get so good at it that obeying Jesus on Sunday...will become the natural, normal thing we do on Monday through Saturday.”

One of the biggest challenges is to understand that the church doesn’t exist for you or me. It exists to glorify God and make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world. We’re a part of that mission by God’s grace. But ultimately the church isn’t about our preferences or our dislikes. It’s about being the Body of Christ in the world. It’s about making God’s love real and visible in the world.

We know there are many people who love Jesus, but who would say that the church is a different story. They struggle with church people. They’ve been hurt by the church people.

When we say we believe in the holy, catholic church, we have to think about those words. Are we holy? We are set apart for God’s sake - not for our own desires. To be holy as the church means that we love Jesus and share his love with others. To be catholic (universal) means to have unity in Christ across the ages and across the world now.

The word for church actually means to be “called out” and came to mean those who belong to the Lord Jesus. It’s always amazing to me to consider all those who seek to follow Jesus and how that binds us together. Think about it! We’re connected to each other. There are people you wouldn’t know or be with except for the fact that you’re connected by Jesus Christ.

At Lake Harbor, we are one congregation with two opportunities for worship. We are not two different congregations, and we certainly aren’t two churches. We are the Body of Christ in this place. I’m grateful for the vision and faith of those who sought to look beyond what was comfortable to meet the needs of our community. That happened more than 11 years ago.

I’m thankful for the continued effort of leaders and this congregation through the VCI (Vital Church Initiative) process in order to move us into the future and encourage us to keep on looking at ourselves and our community. I’m grateful for how we merged together in 2016 so that the church is stronger together than we could be alone.

It’s good that we enjoy different styles of worship. It’s good that we celebrate God’s grace each Sunday. Unity in Christ doesn’t mean uniformity. Unity is about what we share. I attend both worship services every Sunday. I see love for God, faith in Jesus, and the Holy Spirit on the move each week. I see genuine community, deep care,

passionate worship, fervent prayer, and generous giving and sharing. It is a beautiful thing!

So the church is the Body of Christ. We're gathered in Jesus' name, and we are a family - a big family! We aren't perfect; on any given day, we are both saints and sinners (or maybe sinners and saints!), but when we do it right guided by the Spirit, it's incredible. When we welcome people as Jesus welcomed us, when we offer true worship to God, when we learn and grow in grace together through Bible study, when we step out in the power of the Holy Spirit to do new things, when we give generously, it matters!

When we make one person feel less alone and offer the love of Jesus, when music and prayers move us to deeper faith, when classrooms and meetings become safe space to share our deepest joys and greatest pain, when we go into a school and read to a child or serve at Hospice, when we serve others, when we work together to make sure that another congregation in Africa has a place to meet to worship and engage their community, that is good! When we live in love and grace, that's the church.

If we seek to follow Jesus, then each of us needs the church - and the church needs each one of us! This is not a solitary endeavor. We can't do it alone. Pastor Adam Hamilton says, "The church is the continuing presence of Christ in the world." We are a part of making Christ's love real in the world. That is who we are, and it happens wherever we are!

Bishop Will Willimon echoes that: "The church is nothing less than the body of Christ, Jesus' hands and feet, Christ in motion, continuing his movement into the world." Remember that image of Jesus being on the loose - we're a part of that!

Writer Henri Nouwen offers a bold claim: "In a world so torn apart by rivalry, anger, and hatred, we have the privileged vocation (call) to be living signs of a love that can bridge all divisions and heal all wounds." Maybe that sounds idealistic, but we know it happens. That's the love that Paul talks about - the most excellent way we can relate and live. That's the love of God that is more powerful than anything else in this world.

So I want to show you an image that I found powerful. If we are the Body of Christ, that means that we show Christ wherever and whenever.

SHOW SLIDE: "Where the Church Is" image

We represent Jesus to the world in our homes, workplaces, schools, grocery store parking lots, and any other place we find ourselves.

I've noticed myself thinking about how we show love and kindness even as I shop at Aldi. Maybe you know that you have to put a quarter in to get a shopping cart. Many times, people going out give their cart to someone coming in. It's a moment of interaction that doesn't always happen.

The transformation of our lives by God's grace should show itself in our words and actions. That is our witness. We are channels of God's peace and agents of God's love in the world. We are examples of God's power to save sinners and offer new life and hope. And to quote something I read this week: "Sometimes the best evangelism is simply telling people you're a Christian and then not being a jerk." It might sound simple, but it's true!

What do you believe about the church? Or maybe a better question is: why do you believe in the church? Why does it matter that we are the Body of Christ? Consider what the church means to you - how people who love Jesus have made a difference in your life. Write it down or talk it out, and make it a part of your creed.

Each of us can think of someone who has made a difference in our faith life - someone whose love has helped us understand the love of God. Just as you and I can think of someone, you are on someone else's list. You are the Body of Christ, and it matters! Please take your sticker, wear it, remember who you are: "I am the church."

Thanks be to God. Amen.

I invite us to pray together...

Renew us...

PRAYERS OF THE PEOPLE