

PASTORAL PRAYER

Gracious God, who empowers us to be your people, we rely upon your Spirit. We recognize our need for you and your guidance to be faithful people in the Body of Christ and in this world. We are your hands and feet; we are the ones who minister to all of creation. Help us to be those hands and feet with love as our mission that informs all other mission. Let us be agents of love and goodness before anything else; let all know we are Christians by our love.

Indeed, we name today that love is the absolute calling in our lives. We are nothing without love; we cannot be community, we cannot be ourselves, because our very nature is to be with one another. The church in Corinth so long ago forgot about this, looking at the details as the greatest aspect of their faith. Help us to learn from their errors in how we live as a community under Christ today. Guide us to welcome, to see that all are valued, that all have something to contribute to our success together. Guide us to know that nothing else matters, no prophecy, no teaching, no scripture matters when we do not base everything with love, O Source of Love. We pray all these things in the name of Jesus Christ, the Lord of Love who teaches us to love more fully every day, who taught us to pray...

SERMON

Tonight is the night all football fans have been waiting for. Who are you cheering for? Those cheering for the 49ers, raise your hands. Look around; these are the good people. OK, those cheering for the Ravens, raise your hands. Look around; these are the people whose judgment is faulty. They probably don't know much about sports anyway. Hey, 49ers fans, since we have it all right, let's just gather them up and toss them out of the church. Then we'll have the right people here with the right preferences to worship God.

Now how does that sound? It doesn't sound very fair, does it? We are just starting to catch a glimpse of what the Corinthian church was like.

It's fun to have our different preferences in sports. It's what makes the competitions so great. We can shake our hands at the end of a well-fought match and congratulate or console each other. In that way, it's just fine to be divided when we talk about a game. That changes when we take the competition beyond the game. Two years ago, at the beginning of the 2011 baseball season, the San Francisco Giants took on the Los Angeles Dodgers at Dodger stadium. The game was rather ordinary; the Dodgers beat the Giants 2-1. What will go down in infamy is what followed the game. A 42-year old man who happened to be wearing Giants gear, left the stadium after the loss. Dodgers fans, full of themselves and looking for trouble, came upon this man and beat him senselessly. He fell into a coma with brain injuries, this man who happened to be a paramedic and a father of two. He has slowly progressed toward healing. He even got to see his Giants play live in the World Series this last year. Fortunately, time could heal his physical wounds, but there is something deeper here. This is where sports goes wrong. Sports is meant to be a fun past-time, but it often becomes the center of many people's sense of meaning or self-esteem. They get wrapped up in the competition outside of the field, court, or rink, and that's when competition goes too far. Competition can be very, very destructive, because inherent in competition is the implicit idea that the person you are competing against is no longer a person; he or she is an obstacle.

We live in an age of competition. The scales are success or failure. The movie "Talladega Nights" tells us humorously, "If you aren't first, you're last." Some children are raised with this thought and suffer from a consistent sense of inadequacy when they fall

short of their expectations or their parents' expectations. Life is considered a zero sum game, a game where there is always a winner and a loser. That is not our calling. The calling of Christianity is not to competition but love, for competition is temporary, of the moment. Love never ends.

So, how about that scripture? One of your first thoughts may be, "where's the wedding?" We tend to think of the famous "Love Passage" of 1 Corinthians 13 speaking of romantic love. We even hear it set to music quite a bit in settings that are very sweet and reflective. Unfortunately, these settings do not reflect Paul's original intent. We need to start at the beginning: what are we saying about love here? How is love defined? The original Greek has three forms of love: eros, philios, and agape. The Greek here is not talking about eros, romantic love. It is not even talking about philios, brotherly love. It's talking about agape: unconditional love, the love that is always used when Jesus talks of love and God's love toward us. With this in mind, let's reread some of the passage, in the tone that Paul originally intended. (Rereading of 1 Cor. 13 in angry tone).

That's not exactly the type of thing you want to hear at a wedding. What is easy to miss in a standard reading of the text is that Paul is frustrated. We heard about the Body of Christ in last week's scripture reading from 1 Corinthians 12, the fact that we are all one Body, different but unified in Christ. What unifies us in the Spirit of Christ? That discussion just setting this up. Now we get the full payoff. What unifies us in Christ is love. Paul is not just laying out a theological idea. Paul is not just giving us a new image. Paul is virtually on the edge of tears, ready to shake the congregation and say, have you forgotten the point? The point of the Christian life is love!

The Corinthian church, like any church, had their problems. It may not have been as surface level as what team they cheer for, but they were clearly missing something absolutely necessary. They were stuck in a dispute over what gifts were the best. They rated spiritual gifts from the most important to the least important. They essentially made the church a club where you had to have the right credentials: you had to be favored by God enough to have the right gifts. If not, they kicked people out of the church. Paul wrote in response to this disturbing news these ideas about what the church is truly about: community based in love. Now, let's be clear: Paul's intention here is not to make love sound great. He does not want to make you feel all warm and fuzzy describing a lofty ideal. He's unhappy. He's saying that change and reorientation need to happen now. The descriptions of love often contrast with what the community thinks is best. It's not about the gifts: they are finite. They only last a short time. They are important, though. Paul does not bash the spiritual gifts of the community, but Paul is saying that these other things make no sense if you do not undergird them with love. Prophecy is worthless. Speaking in tongues is no more than an unimportant skill. Knowledge is a pastime. Faith has no meaning. They have no lasting power.

Paul is telling us that when we focus on the spiritual gifts as the most important thing, we are looking at who is better, which is selfishness. We are following our own tail when we do not doing what empowers the gifts. We can see right off the bat. When he is saying that love is not envious, boastful, or rude, he's saying: "This is what you are doing. There is no love here!" It reminds you of the passage in Mark 9 when the disciples argue which one of them is the greatest. Jesus doesn't buy into the debate. "Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all." The gifts come secondary to the power behind

them. We are focusing on gifts for ourselves, but love focuses on the other and the other's benefit. Love empowers selflessness.

I think that while this scripture was written to a certain community for a certain reason, the message is still as clear as ever. The church as a whole is very much like the Corinthian church to which Paul wrote. Whether intentional or not, we often see churches that label who is worthy of God and who is not. A story broke out recently about a congregational meeting that went to an Applebee's for dinner. Their waitress was shocked when she got one receipt that crossed out any tip. As a large group, store policy dictated that each person pay 18% as a courtesy to their server, but one person wrote on their receipt, "I give God 10%; why do you get 18%?" The waitress posted the receipt online. She mostly thought it was funny. When it made national news, the Applebee's fired their waitress. As a fellow Christian, I see this as an opportunity sadly wasted to show God's love and the love we are called to show each other as God's blessed creation. Apparently Paul's words didn't get through. He is saying that how we treat our neighbors, how we show each other God's love: these are just as important as how we pray to God and serve God directly.

The most important factor of love is that this is what God is. The first thing we proclaim in our Christian life is God is love. God is acceptance. God is the ever-forgiving force that validates us when no one else will. God is the Creator who gave us life and loves us all along our path. The example of Jesus, from birth to the cross, is one long string of showing us what love truly is. Jesus only called out those who could not live into love within their hypocrisy. Our calling is from God is just as reciprocal: God loves us, so we love our neighbor. In this, we follow the calling of the Spirit, we become the Body of Christ,

because we move together as one in our unique ways. Our Spiritual Gifts have power because they have the right energy behind them. We proclaim to the world that we

Tonight is one of the most divided times in America, well, outside of Election Night. Sides will be drawn, the clash will go down on the field, and one team will come out on top. No matter who wins and who loses, it doesn't matter which team you cheer for. The Christian life is not about who wins and who loses. We are one in Christ, 49ers fans, Ravens fans, Broncos fans, Bears fans, even Packers fans. I will continue to give Jeff Hildreth grief about the Packers, but that's where it ends: a friendly hard time. It's absolutely OK to cheer for whomever your preference is, it's OK to take sides in sports, but the competition needs to stay in certain boundaries. When we leave those boundaries, we are moving into real life, which sports are not. It quickly becomes a very sinful thing, a very dehumanizing thing, when we equate a person with their preferences, sports or otherwise, and make them less than because of it. It is a very sinful thing when we say who is valid and who is not based on how their gifts and how valuable we deem them to be. It's just not based in love, and, bottom line, it's just not Christian. Competition has its bounds in life, but they should be few and far between. The rest of life should be collaborative, seeking our common goals together of mutual love, respect, and goodness to a world that has much more haughtiness than mutual support. Those are God's standards, and we are called to lift those standards as well. Let us color our lives with love, for love does not compete. Love keeps everything in focus. Amen and Amen.