

February 3, 2013

Epiphany 4

"Love Shines in the Body of Christ"

1 CORINTHIANS 12:27-13:13

Now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it. ²⁸ And in the church God has appointed first of all apostles, second prophets, third teachers, then workers of miracles, also those having gifts of healing, those able to help others, those with gifts of administration, and those speaking in different kinds of tongues. ²⁹ Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Are all teachers? Do all work miracles? ³⁰ Do all have gifts of healing? Do all speak in tongues? Do all interpret? ³¹ But eagerly desire the greater gifts. And now I will show you the most excellent way. ^{13:1} If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal. ² If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have a faith that can move mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. ³ If I give all I possess to the poor and surrender my body to the flames, but have not love, I gain nothing. ⁴ Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. ⁵ It is not rude, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. ⁶ Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. ⁷ It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. ⁸ Love never fails. But where there are prophecies, they will cease; where there are tongues, they will be stilled; where there is knowledge, it will pass away. ⁹ For we know in part and we prophesy in part, ¹⁰ but when perfection comes, the imperfect disappears. ¹¹ When I was a child, I talked like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I put childish ways behind me. ¹² Now we see but a poor reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known. ¹³ And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love.

They stood before the Lord on their wedding day. The pastor held before them two strands of dirty brown rope that were twisted together. Then he held before the couple three strands of rope that were tightly braided together with two white strands and one red strand. Only in Christ and his blood do we have forgiveness for our failings to love as we should, and only in Christ do we have the power to love as we should. "Love is patient, love is kind...it is not easily angered, it keeps not record of wrongs."

The Apostle Paul did not write these words to two people who were getting married. They were written to Christians in Corinth who had trouble getting along with each other and loving each other as they should. It seems that these people were proud of the spiritual gifts they were given to serve Christ. They were using these spiritual gifts to inflate their own egos instead of serving each other as members of the body of Christ.

"Love is patient. Love is kind." Jesus wants his love to shine in his body the church. How good are you at showing love to members in your family, to your husband or wife, to your friends, or members of your congregation? How good are you at speaking the truth to other people in love? We need these words to the people of Corinth about love in the body of Christ.

The body of Christ serves

First let's look at who we are as members of the body of Christ. "Now you are the body of Christ, and each of you is part of it." Look at the extreme makeover that has taken place in your life. You were born into this world as a dead corpse. Now you are alive in Christ. You are his body and he is your head. Because you are attached to Christ, everything Christ did for you in love to save and rescue you is yours as a free gift. Because you are attached to Christ, you have a deep responsibility to other members of the body of Christ.

Just as your human body has different parts with different functions, so the body of Christ is made up of people with different gifts meant to serve other members of the body. "And in the church God has appointed first of all apostles, second prophets, third teachers, then workers of miracles, also those having the gifts of healing, those able to help others, those with gifts of administration, and those speaking in different tongues." There were some in Corinth who boasted to others about having the ability to speak in tongues. Notice the ranking of the gifts here. At the top of the list is the gift of bringing God's Word to others. Then there are gifts for serving others, and finally way at the bottom is gift of speaking in tongues. Paul encourages all of us to desire the greater gifts. What a joy it is to see people grow in God's Word through their personal Bible reading and Bible study so they can share the blessings of this Word with other people.

My wife and I were walking one night. The street lighting was poor. She caught her foot on a raised sidewalk and stumbled forward. In a split second my left arm shot out and caught her. I am not bragging about my fast reflexes. She was impressed. That's the way it is in the body of Christ. We use the gifts the Lord has given us to help each other. I cannot thank my helpmate enough for all the times she has encouraged me in my faith. There is a huge blessing to be married to someone who shares the same blessings in Christ that you have.

The body of Christ serves in love

What if I kept my wife from falling and then ridiculed her for being clumsy? She's not. Or what if I kept her from falling and then boasted to her about how much she needed me and how she could not get along without me? It happens in the Christian church that members use their gifts to help each other but they don't always do it in love. Paul speaks about the most excellent way of serving others. "If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am a resounding gong or clanging cymbal."

I once played trumpet in our college band. The director decided to do a piece for the spring concert called "Pictures at an Exhibition" by the Russian composer Mussorgsky. The piece ends with one of the drummers hitting a large Chinese gong. The director decided to use some of the money in the budget to buy the gong and it was worth it. We all did our best to play the challenging parts but the high point of that piece is the gong being struck at just the right time in the final conclusion. How awful it would have been if the drummer decided to hit the gong at different places just to draw attention to himself.

So it is with the Christians who fail to use love when they reach out to help others with whatever spiritual gifts the Lord gives them. If I don't have love when I proclaim God's

Word I am nothing. If I have faith to move mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. If I take everything I have and give it to the poor, but don't have love, I gain nothing. Some years ago, one of our newly organized mission churches was about to dedicate its new church building. Sadly the committee responsible for the meal had no end of tension and infighting as they argued over whether to have a relish tray or just carrots and celery. What was missing in that group?

Remember the movie, "Pay It Forward?" It was about a boy named Trevor who came home from school determined to do things for other people with the hope that instead of being paid back, they would "pay it forward" or pass on the love shown to them to other people. As nice as that movie was it was not realistic. My sinful human nature wants some pay back, or some recognition for showing love. Even pagan philosophers have rightly said, "There is no love but self love."

The body of Christ knows Jesus' perfect love

In striking contrast to human love that is imperfect, we have Jesus' love that is always perfect. This perfect love of Christ that pays for all our past failings to love, also gives us the power to love. "Love is patient, love is kind. ... Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres."

I wish my love was always patient and kind and not proud, and so do you. I wish I could say that I never delighted in evil but always rejoiced in truth and so do you. When someone is more successful than you, do you always rejoice in their blessings or do you become envious and wish you had these blessings instead of them? "Love is kind." Did you know that after WW1 Herbert Hoover became famous in Europe for heading up a relief program that helped people after the war? The people in Finland developed a word for that kind of kindness. They spoke of being "Hoovered." Would it be something if my acts of kindness were so well known in the community that people would speak about being "Degnered."

"Love always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. Notice the words always. Jesus love was always perfect. Listen to him pray for his enemies. See Jesus turn to a dying thief in love and tell him, "Today you will be with me in Paradise." Hear cry out from the cross, "It is finished." Jesus took every unloving act on himself and died for all of them. In love he lived the perfect life of love that I have never been able to live in my place for me. The Greek word used here is agape. It means sacrificial love. This sacrificial love of Jesus that saves you also gives you the power to change my life. As one former evil person said of himself, "He saved the guttermost to the uttermost." His love not only saves us from the guttermost he gives you the power to love to the uttermost.

Permit a story of how human love changed a person's life to direct your attention to Jesus' greater love for you. A fifth grade teacher, a Christian, named Miss Thompson worked hard to treat all her students with love. One year her ability to love and show kindness was severely challenged by a boy named Teddy. Teddy was often untidy, smelly, listless, glassy-eyed and not liked by the other kids. She found herself not liking Teddy and that was not fair considering the records she had seen. 1st grade: Shows promise, poor home life. 2nd grade: Could do better. Mother very ill. 3rd grade: Good boy. Too serious. Mother

died. 4th grade: Slow, well behaved. Father shows no interest.

Christmas came and the kids brought the presents to their teacher. Teddy's was wrapped in brown paper with too much scotch tape. She opened it and out fell a bracelet with some rhinestones missing and a bottle of cheap perfume, half opened. The class laughed. The teacher put on the bracelet, held it too the light and show how it sparkled. She put on the perfume and told the class she liked its smell. After everyone left, Teddy stood around, and finally had enough nerve to tell Miss Thompson, "You smell like my mom and her bracelet looks good on you too." When Teddy left the room, she broke down and cried, vowing to show more love to Teddy. Teddy improved. Miss Thompson received letters from Teddy, second in the class in high school. From the university, he wrote he was first in his class. Four years later, an invitation came to the wedding- from Teddy Stallard, M.D. asking her to sit where his mother would have sat if she were alive. If human love can change people and make them more loving, how much greater is the love of Christ that can change us and it does.

Now we look through a mirror dimly, but someday in heaven we will see Jesus face to face in all his glory. We will experience his love first hand. We will also be given a new world where our love for each other will be perfect. "Now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love." Some day when we are with Jesus again in the place he has prepared for us we will not need faith, because we will walk by sight. We will not need hope, because our hope will be fulfilled. But we will have love as we live our lives in the eternal joy that comes from giving and receiving perfect love as members of the body of Christ. Amen.