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For the Love of God

January 27, 2019
1 Cor 13
1 Cor 14:26-40

Let us pray. Dear God may the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, oh Lord our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen

For our fourth installment in the *United.* series, I chose two passages from the latter part of 1 Corinthians, one you have heard if you've ever been to a wedding, and one that you have likely never heard preached.

In today's readings, Paul is tackling the problem of disorderly worship. The Corinthian church, as we have said before, was divided into factions. Some claimed to follow different christian leaders; some set themselves apart through sexual asceticism, others through sexual freedom; and some used worship as a place to show off their spiritual power through speaking in tongues.

Here Paul chastises believers for using their time together engaging in a practice that doesn't help others to know the Good News.

You can probably guess why a long argument on ecstatic speech hasn't made it into regular preaching rotation in a Presbyterian Church—a denomination affectionately nicknamed the “frozen chosen.”

And to add to the difficulty, in the midst of this argument for decent and orderly worship, we get a rather abrupt aside, which cannot be ignored: “Women should be silent in the churches. For they are not permitted to speak, but should be subordinate, as the law also says. If there is anything they desire to know, let them ask their husbands at home. For it is shameful for a woman to speak in church.”

While I cannot hope to fully resolve the issue of women leaders in the church in these brief remarks, I will give you some important background:

Many Biblical scholars understand these verses to be a later addition to Paul's letter, to bolster a live argument in the early church about the place of women. The reasons to think this is not actually Paul's writing are many, but here are a few:

First, it directly contradicts Paul in chapter 11, arguing that women *must wear hats* if they are to speak in church in chapter 11. [Men, sorry, you're actually not *allowed* to wear them, according to Paul.]

Second, Paul's letters and the stories in Acts of the early church are filled with examples of women in leadership roles. One might ask why Paul would send Phoebe ahead of him to the churches in the Roman capital if she had to stay silent once she got there?

Third, and this one's for you copy editors, these two verses are the only place in the letter addressed to "the churches" rather than directly to the Corinthians.

I'll stop there with that representative sample. If you want more, see me after church.

And yet, though it does seem to be a "later addition," there is no getting around the fact that these verses are in our sacred text, and that many churches have used them to bar women from ministry for centuries.

If we claim to hold up scripture as our sacred norm, we can't just mute them like some off-putting tweet. What do we do then? How do we move forward?

One thing we must learn to see that scripture is not homogenous or systematic. It holds—quite openly!—internal tensions. There are different views on important subjects such as the role of government; of men and women; of the nature of grace vs. good works, and so on. Heck, there are four gospels. These tensions are *baked into* the Bible.

With this in mind, it might seem that we can read the Bible any which way we want—*that is not the case*. But neither can we dismiss the fact that good and faithful people disagree on important things.

Paul knew this, and the early church leaders who prayerfully determined the New Testament canon knew this, and we should know it too.

As people of the book, we must realize that we are *many different members*, united in the body of Christ, not ultimately through words or creeds or social affinity, but by the action and power of the death conquering gospel.

We are not united by common social status, or language, or skin color, or political party, but by the life, death, and resurrection of the person of Christ.

And so, these oddly inserted verses ironically work to bring us back to Paul's main argument in our passages today.

We need to realize that it takes the literal love of God to bring us together as a faithful church. All things pass away, but God's love is not going anywhere.

When I use this text in weddings, I tell people that we make vows before God because sometimes God is the only thing left tying two people together. The same goes for the body of Christ. God's love is not simply one part of our community. Instead, it forms our community, binds it together, sustains it, redeems it, and sends us into the world with the gospel.

This was Paul's argument for this new little church. Building a community for the love of God for the world.

He wrote, "What should be done then, my friends? When you come together, each one has a hymn, a lesson, a revelation, a tongue, or an interpretation. Let all things be done for building up. If anyone speaks in a tongue, let there be only two or at most three, and each in turn; and let one interpret."

The people were speaking over each other, each eager to show off spiritual giftedness. I think it is safe to say that we do not have that problem in the pews on a Sunday morning. The only ones speaking tongues are our youngest members of the body, and for them we are grateful, but they don't take instruction very well.

But to dismiss this passage because our worship is more subdued is a mistake. Ecstatic speech was merely a symptom of the greater problem of division.

When Paul corrected them, he didn't just say, "Take turns speaking in tongues," he also wrote, "Let all things be done for building up."

In other words, whether we like it or not, worship is not a private, personal time. Worshipping God is done communally. Despite what you may have been told, worship is not a spiritual gas station. You do not simply come here to fill up anonymously, "get what you need," and go.

No, worship is a time to share with one another, to build up the community for its mission. Just before our passage, Paul writes, "If... outsiders... enter, [worship so that] the person will bow down before god and worship him, declaring, "God is really among you."

The purpose of a congregation is to work together, through the love of God, so that people will declare "God is really among you."

To paraphrase, tongues are cool, but they don't bring people to Jesus. For us today, that means we must look critically at our practices to see where we are succeeding, and where we might be failing.

This church prides itself on its welcoming presence, its political diversity, its beautiful music, its intellectual sermons, its history... the list goes on. But friendly smiles and a polished worship hour are not enough to woo people from the seductive power of the world. And lifting up friendliness and helpfulness makes it harder to bring our whole, broken and sinful selves to church.

The parts that need Jesus are often the parts we leave at home.

We need to remember that all we do here should be for the proclamation of and witness to God's gospel love in Christ.

We are here because we have seen and felt God's power in our lives—we are here because we have heard the gospel story and felt its judgment and its promise and we have turned and followed a man who promises abundant life.

It is the loving and healing Spirit of God in our midst, not friendly smiles, generous hearts, and a polished worship hour, that help us to build one another up in love. Those things are good, but they are not enough. If we forget who called us together and why, we are like children fumbling with an instrument we don't know how to play.

We have been called together by God, and together we must take responsibility for the discerning of the Spirit of God in our midst.

This will look like taking more risk when we come together, to speak up and to listen to one another, to learn about one another's faith and lives with loving and open hearts. It means being strong enough to get vulnerable with one another. It means being open enough to let the spirit of God surprise you.

We need to be willing to follow the gospel wherever it leads, which will be strange and hard. And in doing so, we must never lose sight of the holy unity to which we have been called.

This will lead us into uncharted territory, which brings us back to ancient tensions which are enshrined even in the Bible itself, such as the status of women in the church.

Women, like me, have not only heard the message of salvation, but a corresponding call to preach that gospel to the world. But we do not act as individuals. It is the *church* that must also discern the will of the Spirit and recognize the call of women and men into service as deacons, elders, ministers, and leaders.

And so what should we do with these verses with these tensions?

That is a question for the church to wrestle with in every age. And Paul makes clear that our struggle must be together, in love, so that the Gospel might be proclaimed in our midst, and so that the world might proclaim, "God is really here among you!"

This sense of working together in love for the gospel is thrown in stark relief when compared to the right/wrong us/them win/lose social context in which we live.

Over and over again in his letter, Paul argues that it is better to be defrauded than to destroy another's life to get justice; it is better to forgive than to be right; better to listen than it is to cut ties with those who disagree. Prophecy, ecstasy, and knowledge, all of these will come to an end, he writes. But love will carry us all.

The unity of the church does not mean uniformity. There will always be struggle and disagreement. (It's there in our Holy Book!) But what ties the members of the body of Christ together is the Love of God. The willingness to set aside the need to be right.

If we cling to truth like a weapon and use it against those who think differently from us, we are the noisy gong, the clanging cymbal, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing. The church is called—we are called to a better way.

If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. If I give away all my possessions, and if I hand over my body so that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing.

Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

Love never ends.

Thanks be to god. Amen.

