

A Still More Excellent Way
Proverbs 15:17; I Corinthians 13:1-13
February 1, 2004
Union Church of Cupertino
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For the third Sunday in a row we're reading someone else's mail - Paul's first letter to the church at Corinth. To be sure we didn't have to steam open the letter but we should remember that the letter began as a specific response to particular problems within the church. In the early chapters of the letter Paul scolds the Corinthians for their immoralities, for their fractured loyalties, for the choices that led them to strife. By chapter 12 Paul must have begun to hear himself. No one loves a crab so he backed off to take a more supportive role.

"You have great gifts," he told them. "And in encouraging variety"

"When each gift is honored and you begin to work in harmony, your church body will begin to resemble Christ's body.

And then, in the last verse of the 12'th chapter Paul leads his trump card:

And I will show you a still more excellent way.

I have a great deal of sympathy for the Corinthians. They were trying to be a church without any model. Today a church can send its leaders to workshops. The Methodists, the Presbyterians, the Congregationalists all have them. They're big, big business at Crystal Cathedral and Willow Creek. Today there are how-to books for start-up churches but in the year 34 or 35 the members at Corinth were doing church for the very first time.

Paul took pity. He gave them the best he knew, a hymn about love that set the standard for church behavior in Corinth and Cupertino. Brides and grooms have latched onto it as a talisman for marital bliss. Marital becomes martial when the "I" is misplaced and Paul's hymn to love in I Corinthians 13 sets the ego in its place. The words of Paul's hymn are on the screen behind me. Let us read them together:

*Love is patient and kind; love is not jealous or boastful;
it is not arrogant or rude; it is not irritable or resentful;
it does not rejoice at wrong but rejoices in the right.
Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things,
endures all things. Love never ends. - R.S.V.*

This sets a standard for those in Corinth and for us in Cupertino, for those about to be married and for those starting a family. There's nothing more important than living your lives by love.

But I have sympathy for the Corinthians. Despite Paul's description of the attributes of love it remains a smoke and mirror concept, very difficult to define. How can we recognize love when

it's before us? What does love look like when it's in town?

I had a friend, a highschool friend, who believed love was giving his girl friend a hickey.

Tom T. Hall, country entertainer, wrote a song about the things he liked to love:

*There ain't but three things in this world
That's worth a solitary dime:
That's old dogs, and children, and watermelon wine.
Those three remain. All else passes away.*

To say love is a more excellent way is to say almost nothing until we can discover what living in love could mean for our lives.

I have read of mothers such as Susannah Wesley who accompanied their sons to college - and took rooms in the town in case they were needed , all in the name of love.

I have grieved with a father, who, in the name of love, gave his son a motorcycle as soon as the son could drive.

Saying "Christians love one another" is not particularly helpful. Paul was doing his best to define it but I believe that God did a better job.

God, too, knew what it was like to be a beginner. In the beginning there was the Word and the Word was with God and the word was love but God didn't have a clue as to how to share it. In the beginning God gave the law: do not covet your neighbor's wife - it'll make a mess of your life and hers. Don't ignore your parents - why would you cut yourself off from a built in source of wisdom? Honor them. Do not bow down to idols. That's like waiting at a station where the train never comes. In the beginning God laid down the law and God really thought that love was in it but as the Bible is our witness, it didn't work. God tried scolding just like Paul. Nothing changed. Finally God took flesh to present it, and while the whole world didn't immediately become a love-in, Jesus changed a lot of things.

And I believe putting flesh on love is the continuing task for all church members, to so embody love that all the world will see it and recognize it as being of immense worth. Walk the talk. Live by love. When someone embodies love we all benefit.

When I was brand new in the ministry, pea green behind the ears, I was called to be the minister in Concord, East Saint Johnsbury and Lower Waterford, Vermont. Three towns, three churches, three services every Sunday, 9:00, 10:15, and 11:30. It was a field ripe for brevity. In Lower Waterford one of my church members was Clarence Young. You'll see his picture behind me. It was taken this past October. I had gone back to Vermont to say thank you to the people of those villages for all that they had given to my ministry. Clarence is now 93.

In his fifties Clarence was the town factotum. He drove the town school bus. He maintained the two public cemeteries. Clarence kept the weeds down outside of the self-serve library. He did

everything he could for his church.

Clarence taught me - and everyone else that was watching that love always does what it can. No holding back. No saving oneself for a rainy day. The parents of the Lower Waterford petitioned that I start a midweek youth club for their school age children. I was willing but said that someone would have to take responsibility for gathering the kids. Most of the parents were occupied during the day. Clarence said "No problem." I don't know if he ever checked with the selectmen. I doubt if he asked the parents of all the children. But on Wednesday after school the bus stopped in front of the church and Clarence opened the door and said "Everyone out!" It made no difference if your parents went to the village church or were Mormons. "Everyone out!" At the end of the hour Clarence returned and everyone was taken home.

Love does what it can.

I learned from Clarence that love will not let pride displace it. We were going to have our first ever Layman's Sunday at the Lower Waterford Church. I'd asked Clarence to read one of the scripture lessons and he had agreed. The night before, Clarence's wife Mary called and said there was trouble. Would I come right over? I went to discover that the trouble was that Clarence didn't know how to read. Mary had been reading the passage to him in the hopes that he could memorize it but that had not happened. Clarence was in tears. He had so looked forward to making an offering - his offering - in that service. The next day Mary read the scripture and Clarence led us in the Lord's Prayer. If ever you think that the Lord's Prayer has become a rote habit, imagine how you think Clarence recited it that day. Even God listened up.

But most of all I learned from Clarence that love never ends.

One of the hardest things I ever did was to pace with Clarence along the shore of the Cummerford Dam as the divers looked for the bodies of two of his grandsons and one of their friends. The boys, all teenagers had packed their camping gear in a row boat called their dogs to join them and rowed out to an island in the middle of the reservoir which was on the northern reaches of the Connecticut river. Only the dogs knew how to swim and only the dogs returned. For a while Clarence tried to make a deal with God through me. If only the boys would turn up in New Hampshire - he wouldn't care if they'd run away - If only the boys would turn up he'd give his life to God. But there were no deals. Over the months that followed Clarence found ways to let his love live.

My wife learned that none of the children in the community knew how to swim. She had her Red Cross Instructor certificate and decided to teach them all. Bobby Lee let her use his pond. The selectmen bought the necessary insurance. Clarence drove the bus. Four days a week for a month Clarence pulled up next to the pond, opened the door and said "Everyone out and be sure you learn how to swim. And there was another contribution. For as long as Clarence continued to work for the town, Lower Waterford had the best kept cemeteries in the whole state of Vermont.

Love does what it can. Love doesn't let pride deflate it. Love never quits. These things I learned from Clarence. These things Clarence learned from Jesus. Love is explained when we live it.

That's the prime purpose of the church.