

“Love is All that Matters”

Fourth Sunday after Epiphany – Year C

1 Corinthians 13:1-13

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Rev. Dr. Kevin Orr

Probably most of you remember the old song that goes, “Anything you can do, I can do better. I can do anything better than you.” It’s a fun song about the battle of the sexes. It speaks to the demand from women to be treated with respect and to not be dismissed as incapable of doing what men can do. Of course, this song pushes the envelope by saying that women, or at least the woman singing this song, can do things *better* than men, or at least the man she is singing to. That’s what she is saying. She is more capable, more skilled, more able than he is. Whether that’s demonstrably true or not is almost beside the point. What I think she is trying to say is that she ought to be respected and not dismissed as a “silly woman.” She makes her point by saying she does things *better* than he can.

There is a show on TV these days that I wish never went on the air, but it is a show that a lot of people like: “The Bachelor.” It’s a show about a group of women who attempt to win the heart of the bachelor.

He hangs out with them, goes on dates, and along the way chooses which women can continue in the competition, slowly whittling it down to two for the final show when he picks one. All along the way, the women on the show do all they can to show the bachelor that they are the best suited for a long-term relationship, maybe even marriage. These women throw themselves at him to try to get him to fall in love with them. Each woman hopes to show the bachelor that she is *better* than the rest of the women in the competition.

Anyone who has applied for a competitive job position knows that they are competing with others for that job. You have to research the company and tailor your résumé to demonstrate that you are the perfect fit for the position. It may feel a little uncomfortable to talk about how awesome you are. But if you want the job, you have to sell yourself, to make the case that you are *better* than anyone else who is applying.

In these three examples I have shared with you there is a common thread of competition that you have the best gifts, the best abilities, and the best talents. That's how it is in life. Sometimes in order to achieve our goals we have to be a little competitive. We are called to make the

case that we are better than others in order to get what we want, whether that be respect, or a life partner, or a dream job. Sometimes competition is part of life. And competition can be healthy. It challenges us to do our best, to be focused, to push ourselves. Competition can clarify who has the better skills and abilities, who has the most merit, who is best suited for a long term relationship, or a job, or anything else where merit makes a difference. Competition can be healthy.

The church in Corinth had some competition going on among themselves but I would not call it healthy. Paul certainly saw a problem with it. The Corinthians were in a competition with each other over their spiritual gifts. Those who had certain gifts were viewed, or at least viewed themselves, as more worthy, valuable, meritorious. If you happened to have the gift of speaking in tongues, or prophecy, or knowledge, then you considered yourself to be better, or at least have better, more valuable gifts than anyone else in the church. You should be held in higher esteem. You should have more influence. You should be viewed as *better* than anyone else. Well, that kind of attitude didn't sit well with Paul and he had no problem addressing it head on.

As we talked about last week, Paul told the Corinthians that all these spiritual gifts are of equal value. Each one is important, has a part to play for the common good. One gift is not greater or more important than the other. But today we hear Paul make his second point about spiritual gifts. He tells them, and us, that if these spiritual gifts are not used from a place of love then they are of little use. Exercising your gift as a way to puff yourself up or to feather your nest minimizes the impact of the gift. It draws the attention to you instead of to the one you are helping or the God who gave you the capacity to help. No doubt, giving people knowledge, working a miracle, healing somebody, doing a work of faith, that's all good. But if it's done out of pride or arrogance instead of out of love it kind of puts out a bad vibe. Recipients are grateful for your ministry but may be saying to themselves, "Did that person help me because they really care or was I just used by that person to make themselves look good?" To do good for reasons other than love can come across as a little, I don't know, slimy.

It is important for us to identify our spiritual gifts. We need to take the time to discern how God has equipped us for the season of life we

are in so that we can put those gifts to use for the common good. God desires each of us to do things that benefit others, that builds up our community, that makes the world more like how God wants the world to be. We each have a role to play, a destiny to fulfill, by using our gifts that God has given us.

But it is also important that we do what we do from a place of love. The common good is harmed when people do what they do out of arrogance or pride, to be seen by others, or out of ego. The common good is harmed when people are posturing in order to stand out as better than everyone else or to imply that others have less value than themselves. The common good is harmed when people are driven more by where they fit in the pecking order than being driven by love for God and for others.

Love is what matters most. Paul says that love always lasts, along with faith and hope. The gifts we have to share are temporary. *We* are temporary, at least in this life. St. Luke's United Methodist Church is temporary. This building is temporary. Columbus is temporary. The United States is temporary. The human species is temporary. The earth

is temporary. But love is everlasting. Love is always possible. Love, just like the God of love, is everlasting. Love is the context out of which everything exists. God creates because God loves. Because there is God, there is love. The purpose of all existence is for God to be in a loving relationship with it. Love really is all that matters.

In fact, what is the fundamental commandments we have been given? We are meant to love God and to love our neighbors as ourselves. And, if I might add, we are to love the earth, of which we are a part. We are earth creatures. And we have been given the responsibility to tend and care for the earth. That was the first commandment given to human beings by God, which we read about in Genesis, chapter 1. To love God, to love others, to love the earth, to love ourselves, that's really what it is all about. So we do what we do motivated by love. At least, that's what God intends for us.

I think about the federal workers who had to work without pay for over a month. Sure, they are going to get back pay, although it is unclear to me if contractors doing government work will be compensated. But how do you make ends meet when you go a month without pay and you

live paycheck to paycheck? You still have to buy gas for your car, food for your family, rent to your landlord or your mortgage payment to your bank. It was a tough and unfair situation all those workers were in. But many of them came to work anyway. Why? Because they believed in what they were doing. Because they love the country and the American people they serve. When you work without pay, it's got to be out of love, right? It's got to be because you care more about the common good than your own good. It was an unasked for sacrifice. And we should appreciate those who came to work anyway. They do deserve special recognition because they were motivated by love and not by personal gain. Isn't that the irony? Those who serve for the common good and not for their own recognition are the ones most deserving of recognition.

There are times we use our spiritual gifts, working for the common good, motivated by love, and we don't get recognition in return or receive any material benefit. Sometimes when doing good, you can get looked over, taken for granted, not even thanked. But, then again, does that matter if you are doing what you do because you love God and all whom God has created? Sometimes doing the right thing, helping others,

sacrificing for the common good, will have to be its own reward.

Sometimes doing it for love is all the compensation you are going to get.

Is that ok? Was it not Jesus who showed us what this is like in the extreme when dying on the cross he looked at all those haters and said,

“Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing?”

Sometimes the only One who is going to acknowledge your good work is the One who sees all.

Sometimes what you do is recognized and sometimes it isn't.

Sometimes what you do works out and sometimes things don't work out.

Sometimes what you do has visible benefits and sometimes what you do appears to have no impact at all. But if what you do is done with love, with faith and hope, then maybe getting recognition or good outcomes becomes secondary. It seems to me that if we do what we do not for recognition, not to achieve a specific result, but as a way to express love, then that's enough to feel like we are doing the right thing.

So this is our task: to use our spiritual gifts to love God, to love others, to love the earth. We get who God is. We get what the earth is.

But who are the others? Or, as the lawyer asked Jesus, “Who is my

neighbor?" The answer to that question is the subject of our next sermon series that starts next Sunday. Over the next few weeks, we will be challenged to see the people that live around us and consider how we are responding to their needs. So stay tuned.

Let us pray.

God of love, we thank you for the ways you have equipped each of us to love You back, and to contribute to the common good. With the help of the Holy Spirit, motivate us always to act from a place of love above any other motive. This we ask in the name of Jesus, who demonstrated for us what a life motivated by love requires. Amen.