

Sunday, January 31, 2016
Pastor Erin Bouman, Irving Park Lutheran Church
1 Corinthians 13

First Love

Last Sunday after church I was admiring Amelia Carlson's dress. Amelia is the big sister of Eli Carlson, who is about to be baptized—but calling Amelia big is a relative term; she's not quite 3. Still I know that Amelia takes her big sister-ship seriously, has strong opinions about it. (Three year olds are known for their strong opinions.) So last week Amelia was wearing a lovely, gauzy, poufy white dress to church, and was twirling around in the narthex in it. I was admiring it, and her twirls, and her mother, Alissa, old me, "She was recently in a wedding and wore that dress, so today when I told her we were going to church, she said that she needed to wear that."

Like Amelia last Sunday morning, this Sunday morning we too might have weddings on our minds. We may be thinking of weddings when we hear today's second reading, the thirteenth chapter of 1st Corinthians. This Bible reading, this chapter, is often read at weddings—it was read at my wedding—and it's sometimes known as "the love chapter." (Calling it the "love chapter" makes it sound like we should now cue Barry White.)

But this passage, this chapter, 1st Corinthians 13, was not intended for weddings, so Bible scholars tell us. This reading is not directed at couples, they say—remove the needle from the Barry White record and take a closer look at the context in which the "love chapter" occurs. We've been hearing that context for the past few Sunday mornings; there's been a pattern to the second readings, moving sequentially through the book of 1st Corinthians. This "book" is actually a letter, the first letter written to people in Corinth, (thus the name), by a person named Paul. The Corinthians are new believers; they are new at this church thing. Paul started the church in Corinth, and then he went off to other cities, keeping in touch by letter. Paul writes with guidance for people in churches, guidance about how to live, how to treat other people, how to in relationships, when you know about Jesus.

Paul's guidance, Paul's rhetoric, Paul's argument in 1st Corinthians follows a sequence, a pattern. Two weeks ago, in the first part of chapter twelve, we heard about all the various spiritual gifts that people in churches have. Paul writes about how very gifted all his listeners are; Paul tells every person in a church that God's Holy Spirit has been poured out upon them—just as we'll be pouring water over Eli, offering thanks and prayer for gifts of the Holy Spirit. After writing about spiritual gifts, Paul continues with an illustration. Paul notes how all these different gifts make the church like a body. Different members do different things, and all of them are important. If one gets hurt, the whole body suffers. I'll bet that Amelia and Eli illustrate this, too. I'll bet that sometimes when little Eli starts crying, Amelia will suddenly realize that she is hurt, too. Finally, after writing about how the church is like a body, how the church is the very body of Christ, after all of that in chapter 12, Paul arrives at chapter 13, the "love chapter."

All of which is to show, say Bible scholars, all of which shows that this reading not intended for weddings, it's intended for a church. Moreover, scholars say, as the context reveals, it's a letter for a church in conflict. This letter is for a church in sharp disagreement, this chapter is for a community that's arguing about all kinds of things, for people who quarrel about whose spiritual gift is the most important, for places that have some people who are hurting, feeling

inferior. This chapter is for people who fight about whose needs come first, who argue about who is spending too much time on their career, and who's been doing more around the house, and who is being uncommunicative, and who is being demanding, and who took out the trash last night. Maybe this is a good reading for a wedding.

1st Corinthians 13 is not first about weddings, for sure, but the love chapter is good for weddings, it is good for relationships of all kinds. It's good for marital relationships—because marriage is much more than a wedding—and it's good reading for other relationships, too: relationships between siblings, and relationships between friends, relationships between neighbors, and, especially, primarily, relationships between church members. The letter is directed at churches, first, because churches should be clear about what comes first. Love comes first. The love that God has for us comes first, comes to us, regardless of anything we do. God's love is as free as the water that will fall over Eli's forehead. Being a Christian means being means receiving that love, and patterning your life after it. Being a Christian means knowing—not just knowing, means living so that love comes first.

You can speak like an angel, Paul writes, you can be unearthly in your eloquence, but if you are not loving, you are just a bunch of noise. You can know a lot, Paul writes, you can understand mysteries and you can have absolute confidence in God, but if your confidence and your understanding lack love, none of it matters. You can do all kinds of things, Paul writes, you can do a lot, a lot that sounds good, but if you do it without love, it's worthless. First, you must love. Love is more important. Love comes first. Love is a more excellent way.

That's what Paul writes, about love, Paul writes that it is a "more excellent way," but we rarely hear it, at weddings, or even in church. I don't mean—at least I hope I don't mean—that we don't hear about love. I hope that's not true. What I mean is that we rarely hear this phrase, about love being "a more excellent way." That phrase is the introduction to 1st Corinthians 13, but we rarely hear it, because it's the very last verse of 1st Corinthians 12. Because it's a bridge verse, it gets skipped. You may have noticed this last week, how last week we ended the reading of 1st Corinthians 12 with verse 31a. Were you also wondering what happened to verse 31b? I think our reader last week, Grace Stumme, must have wondered too. Grace, who is herself near the end of twelve and approaching 13, Grace was the one assigned that last part of 1st Corinthians twelve, and she must have somehow sensed that something was missing at the end of chapter 12, for she ended last week's reading in a way that left us hanging. Grace read the final verse listed in the bulletin, "But strive for the greater gifts..." and then she returned to her seat. You may remember that I then jumped in verbally, from my chair over there, I quickly interposed, "Word of God, Word of life." That's what we say at the end of a reading, so we would all feel settled and comfortable.

Grace had it right, the reading wasn't done yet. We cannot be settled and comfortable, we must continue, continue with verse 31b, continue into, and through, all of 1st Corinthians 13. "But strive for the greater gifts," Paul writes at the end of chapter twelve, "but strive for the greater gifts," comma, "and I will show you're a more excellent way." "I will show you a more excellent way," colon: "Love."