

Strive for the greater gifts, says the apostle Paul, and I will show you a more excellent way. What is this more excellent way? It is the path of love.

Paul did not have weddings in mind when he penned these words. Rather he was writing to a congregation who was in conflict and openly dismissive of one another. This letter is addressed to the church at Corinth, people who gathered in the name of Jesus - the purveyor of peace, the one who welcomed outcasts – while at the same time they were at each other's throats.

They argued over who got to speak in worship, whose voice should be listened to, even how to share a meal in the Lord's name. Their energy went towards climbing over one another and replicating the status structure of the world around them with little regard for serving others.

Their spiritual gifts were varied and abundant. But their gifts lead to competition and chaos, bickering and dissension. Why? Because love was missing – the love that is not only aware of the neighbor but is concerned for their welfare. Gifted people who have not love are like poisonous wells or viral epidemics – destructive of all who come in contact.

Paul reminds us that these gifts they've been granted are incomplete; they pale in comparison with their source – the life force we call the love of God.

Love is the more excellent way: where difference and unity can co-exist, where disagreement and mutual concern live together.

There is nothing sentimental or easy about the love Paul speaks of. It takes work, and is seen in our actions.

Love shows patience and acts with kindness, it acts without envy or boasting or arrogance. Love is not rude. Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, and endures all things. Love is possible within our faith communities because Jesus is the center.

Let me be clear, this is hard. The realities of human society challenge our intent towards love every day! Radical communal love

requires a shared life where we address our differences with patience and well-meaning.

It requires the discipline to take a deep breath and then dampen our envy and sharp tongue. It requires our willingness to accept one another **without agreeing** with one another, to live with **the tension of undecided questions**, to allow room for ideas and practices **which are not our choice**.

It is what sets Christian community apart from others.

When dissension tears a community apart, Jesus is not at its center. Without Jesus, buildings, budget and mission strategies mean nothing. Differences can be acknowledged, respected, celebrated in unity only when love is at the center of what we do as individuals and who we are as a community of faith.

Love like this often comes at a personal cost as the cross so aptly reminds us. What is hard on a personal level is far too often a failure on a communal level. These last 2 years have reminded us of what society looks like when love is absent, when human community places greater emphasis on personal comfort than on community welfare.

Our news feeds and TV screens are flooded with images of neighbors who fail to act in concern and kindness towards others.

Paul challenges us to let go and tap into the way of love – where you cease measuring yourself against others, and your life is not organized by assigning value and status to some and not others.

Love is the more excellent way, in fact, it is the life force of God - and it is essential to the meaning and purpose of Christian community.

Christian love is a full body workout. It requires personal discipline and immersion in the practices and presence of Jesus. Remember those rubber bracelets from the 80's? What Would Jesus Do?

They were a physical reminder to approach any question less confident that we know what Jesus thought, and more wondering what LOVE would look like in this discussion.

We have watched an upheaval in the concept of 'church' recently. It has led to discussions on the nature of Jesus' presence in the Holy Communion meal – Can it happen over the internet, on a Zoom screen? We've learned again the value of being in fellowship, supporting and reaching out to others. Into the turmoil of our shared life, we've been asked to examine once again our relationships and our responsibilities.

We've watched images of people mis-treated, oppressed, or locked out of our society and our nation. These challenge each believer to re-consider their own discipline of love, their own commitment to the way of Jesus.

It also means re-examining our faithfulness to that love in our Christian community. How do we measure up? How can we grow? Have we avoided the tension that differing opinions create in a small group? Have we welcomed folks out of love and without judgment, committed to discovering how to live with one another when we disagree? Have we shied away from the people at the margins and kept to the center of the road?

These are the hard questions that the 13th chapter in Paul's letter to the Corinthians raises. **Yet Paul assures us that LOVE never fails: it does not come to an end; it does not falter....**because God is the true source of LOVE and it only gives life.

Faith, hope and love abide, these three. **Faith** will one day be made complete by sight. **Hope** will one day reach its fulfillment in Christ. **Love forever remains** – and it remakes us from the inside out, one act at a time.

The love of God in Jesus flows through Holy Spirit, and in to us – drawing us forward into life in God....where we focus on living lives filled with patience, kindness, grace, compassion.

We pick up Paul's call to faith and Pursue love –

May it be so among us.