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1 Corinthians 13:1-13
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The Vanity of Loveless Piety

Good morning church. Today's new testament reading is usually a wedding verse. For a good reason, love, that is, patient, kind, and not envious or boastful, is a necessary ingredient in any marriage relationship. However, this Sunday, I want to pluck this verse out of a wedding sermon and put it within its original context, a Corinthian church where they argued about whose spiritual gift was the greatest. Then enters love, without which piety is mere vanity.

I was an average teenager, but I wanted to be "super" at something to stand out somehow. The problem was that I was not very good at school, was far from the most popular kid, and struggled at sports. But I still thirsted for that status, that recognition that I was good at something. So I decided to read my Bible every day, pulling out random verses from memory. When I sang praise music at camp, I would close my eyes and raise my hands. I tried to be the perfect little Christian, who followed all the rules and wore the Jesus freak bracelets. Maybe I was worried about getting to heaven, but mostly I wanted to be noticed for being super at something. But what made me come to my senses was when my best friend said to me, "you're so annoying and not acting yourself... you're being a super Christian." Woof. I thought I was doing everything right, but I was doing it for the wrong reasons.

Paul also had to deal with a bunch of annoying super Christians. People thought that if they spoke in tongues or healed people, it would make them the best Christians. Paul says it best in the previous chapter that we are all one body of Christ but have many members. Just like we need our hands to hold, our ears to hear, and eyes to see, the church functions best when there is a beautiful diversity of spiritual gifts. If we were a church of only singers, we could turn to Ro or Joleen and say, you are the best Christians, but we have many gifts for music, service, and peacemaking then perhaps we will not claim to be the best. The church in Corinth was not a story of people acting wicked, but is a story of boastful and arrogant people who wanted to prove they were the best and everyone should imitate them. And so Pastor Paul uses his signature tough love and tells the people that their medicine is that they need more love.

Thinking about love brings us to one of the most perplexing passages, If I can speak the gospel eloquently or speak in tongues but have no love, it doesn't matter. If I have prophetic powers, understand all mysteries, and have faith that can move mountains, but no love, it doesn't count. Even if I sold all my possessions and handed my body over to persecution but have no love, why bother. Paul is bringing up some serious pious actions, things that would make anyone a pillar of the church, someone to look up to and imitate. This is a really difficult passage for people who

want to do the right thing. So why is Paul asking us to consider love as necessary? Or, to say it another way, what is love to change a boastful and arrogant action into worthy action?

Here's one way of thinking about it, we know love by its absence. How many of you have experienced someone quoting bible verses at you to win an argument? The Bible is a good thing, but if I use it as a weapon, it has no power to heal the world. How many of you have seen extraordinary generosity poisoned by pride, where the donor slaps their name on a building or controls how organizations use "their" money? How many of you have heard sermons of hellfire, calling believers into shame to swell the numbers of a church?

I can see the absence of love when someone is more concerned with their status. Therefore, I can see love when I love your neighbor as myself when I consider someone's welfare more important than my pride. When I inject love, these actions change their meanings. Quoting a bible verse in a devotional can bring hope. A generous gift can put a roof over someone's head. A sermon of love can bring healing to someone's heart.

So what do I have to say to that teenager me? Reading the Bible and feeling the spirit stir me in music are good spiritual practices. I needed to learn not to use God as just another way to be well-liked. And I think that in our churches we can understand this too. There is power in being someone important in this church. There are only 100 of us on a given Sunday. Many people live busy lives taking care of children or demanding jobs. And so those of us, with time, are asked to take up the heavy burden of running the sound or being the moderator. And as we think about these leadership positions, as we consider coming to our annual meeting this evening, I hope that we can remember Paul's challenging words, if I have the faith to move mountains but do not have love, I am nothing.

Having love does not mean that we don't have boundaries and convictions. Having love does not mean that we won't have a conflict because healthy conflict can be a source of rich growth. I believe that having love means that when we hold positions of power or disagree, we remember that we are all beloved children of God, and when one part of the body of Christ suffers, the whole suffers. Because in the end, we all only see through a mirror dimly. Amen.