

WGUMC September 11, 2016 I Corinthians 13:1-13

Dear Paul,

I haven't written in a while. I guess that's a good thing, since I usually write to you when I am in some kind of trouble. When you see a letter from me, I bet you think, "Uh-oh, what's wrong now?" There sure was something wrong that first time I wrote to you when I was a junior in high school. OK, it was a creative writing assignment, but it was also a plea for pastoral counseling in the midst of a spiritual crisis. Then there was the church split when I was in college and the relationship disaster in seminary. Then the brain surgery and various mid-life challenges since then.

Well, there is no crisis this time. After listening to a lecture series all about you as I drove to and from my running trail this summer, I have to confess that I have spent more time writing to you than actually attending to you. I have spent more time complaining to you about my life than I have spent

learning from you how to live it. But lately I've been having a keen sense that time is marching on, and I still have a lot to learn.

So I am getting ready to spend some time sitting at your feet, digging into your letters and wrestling with your words, because I know that there is wisdom there that I've been missing. But I'm going to need your help to find it. You see, there are many years and many cultures between us, and I don't always understand where you're coming from. Yet, I am supposed to be able to help others understand.

First I thought that if you could give me a good general principle to guide me in my study, then I would have a truth I do understand and I could use it to interpret the passages I don't understand. Then I realized that you did give us that principle. You laid it out in your letter to the Corinthians, in a passage that what we now call "the Love Chapter."

It's a beautiful passage. However, most of us only hear it at wedding ceremonies, which is too bad, because I know that it doesn't have anything to do with weddings. It has to do with real life and the average wedding these days is about anything but real life.

The danger here is that the beauty of your words can distract us from the power of your message: out of all the good things in life, the greatest thing is love. In fact, when all is said and done, the only thing that matters is love. You said it and I believe it.

But that poses a problem for me and for many other people. A lot of us would rather read the Gospels, because when we read your letters, Paul, we wonder, "Where's the love?" After all, you tell slaves not to seek their freedom [I Cor 7:21] and women to keep their heads covered and their mouths shut in church [I Cor 11:1-16; 14:34]. You also tell folk to submit to authorities because all their authority comes

directly from God. [Rom 13:1-7] Is that true of Hitler?

Mussolini? Idi Amin? Don't get me wrong, but love is not the first thing I think of when I read these passages.

Obviously we live in a time that is very different from yours. And so we have the challenge of taking this love into different cultures and we encounter lots of questions that you never wrote about. For instance, what does love mean in this post 9-11 world we live in? Less and less it would seem to anyone who pays attention to politics or keeps a watch on world affairs. When we look at what's going on and listen to what is being said, we wonder: how on earth can we relate your Love Chapter to our lives and put your poetry into practice?

There's something else that goes beyond principles and politics and gets a little personal. I mention it because I happen to know that it stops a lot of people from paying attention to you and I know that is not what you want to do. The problem is this: You said, "Love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or

rude." Yet many people read your letters and think of you as boastful and arrogant and yes, sometimes even rude. I say this as a friend, Paul: You sometimes rub people the wrong way. You said to the Philippians, "Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves." [Phil 2:3] But we're not seeing the humility. What we see is ego! Father Richard Rohr thinks that you have a huge ego, but he loves you anyway. He says that God had to give you a big ego or else you wouldn't have been able to do what you did, almost single-handedly start a major world religion. That may well be true, but it doesn't make it easy for us to listen to what you have to say. And now more than ever we need to hear what you have to say.

Paul, I said that there was no crisis, but that doesn't mean that I have no concerns. I just started my 28<sup>th</sup> year under appointment as pastor. You'd think I'd know the job pretty well by now, but it seems to me that the job is getting stranger

every day. The culture is changing, we are changing, and the church is changing, too, in ways we can readily see and in ways we can't begin to know.

The reason we need to hear what you have to say is that you were able to figure out what love should look like as you took it from one town to the next, from one culture to another. You put flesh on the promise of the love of God and gave it to people who had never seen or heard of the love made flesh in Jesus Christ. You made that love tangible and understandable, and we have to learn to do the same, in our own lives, in our families, in our neighborhoods and workplaces and in our church. We have to realize that what love looks like to our sisters and brothers now is not what love looked like way back when. We are going to have to do what you did, Paul: become fools for the sake of the Gospel and write a new "Love Chapter" for Willow Glen.

We can't write it on our own. We're going to need your guidance, so help me think of a way to begin:

Love is open, unforced and unfenced. Love breaks rules and crosses boundaries.

Love reaches out; it is other-centered. It goes to live on the margins, standing with the poor and suffering with the oppressed.

Love is generous and merciful. Love is counter-cultural.

Love is not scheming or self-serving. It is not self-justifying or self-inflating.

Love is humble. It does not seek attention. It does not try to sell itself but freely gives of itself.

Love never loses heart, never gives up, and never falls short.

Love is our joy in sorrow, our strength in weakness, our courage in fear, and our hope in despair.

Love may take a very long time, but we will get there and in the end everyone wins.

With love in mind, Paul, I think we're ready to dig in. Next week, we'll check in with you and the Thessalonians. Until then, amen.