

The Monroe Congregational Church
Lunch Tables
Rev. Jennifer Gingras
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1 Corinthians 13:1-13

Odds are, if you have ever been to a wedding in the United States, you have probably heard this scripture Cady read before. It's a favorite, and we can certainly hear why. Here is an exquisite reminder of the power of love. Love does not insist on its own way? Really? That's the lesson to learn right there. I need to remember that.

Have you ever heard of a feedback sandwich? When I worked in corporate, it was a technique I'd use when I had to give difficult supervisory notes to someone. The idea is, if you have something negative to an employee that reports to you, you try and layer it with some positive stuff, so that the hearer can take in the feedback. It's a kinder, gentler way to lead, that's supposed to help a person improve.

Because the truth is, no matter who we are, we can only be on the receiving end of a rant for so long. That's kind of what Paul was doing in this letter, giving them a feedback sandwich.

Paul was angry and disappointed at the behavior of the church at Corinth. Now this was a church he had founded a few years earlier, an urban congregation known for its cultural and economic diversity. Some members were wealthy elites; some were from the working class. Some were small business owners, and others were government officials. And they came from a wide variety of religious backgrounds, too.

It seems that with their differences in value systems and power dynamics, it didn't take long for this church to become embroiled in conflict. Just to mention a few of the things they were fighting about...

Could Paul's authority be trusted (and if not him, what leader SHOULD they trust)?

How should they respond to accusations of sexual immorality, is kicking a person out of the group enough or should they engage in some kind of public shaming?

And then, the purity police among them wanted to know if it was okay to eat the food offered to idols, or should that be off limits (because, you know, one of them saw another do it!)?

What does it mean to speak in tongues, and who is smart enough to interpret what it is they are even saying?

When gathering for the Lord's supper, should they just eat their own food whenever they want even if the people who came late don't get any?

And perhaps my favorite... should women cover their hair in worship, so that they are not so distracting?

If you're looking for something to do, skim through the whole letter and think about how amazing it is that the Church has even survived!

Paul's annoyed. So, in the middle of this reprimand, it's like he takes a breath and decides to add a layer of grace to the feedback sandwich. Maybe he remembers what it was like looking into the eyes of his people the last time he saw them. Maybe he's taking into consideration all they have been through, and how frayed their nerves must be. Perhaps he is considering their trials and tribulations who have made them who they are.

But what do you say to the ones you love when you are in the middle of a fight? How do you even get them to hear you, to drop the charges and the old tired grudges and the 'she said' and 'he said' just for a second so you can talk?

Paul centers himself, calls for quiet and says, *"Let me show you a still more excellent way, something so much more: it's love, is love, is love, is love, is love."*

This is a word we need to hear today. If you ask me, it feels like there is so much lately that's embroiled in conflict. We can't even talk to one another. You feel the pressure to hurry up and get on the right side, join the right group, and take the right stand. It's like musical chairs— hurry up and get a seat before the music stops, and I better get the right one because all my friends are watching — and God help me, I don't want to get yelled at, or laughed at, or embarrassed by doing the wrong thing...

It reminds me of what it was like to find a place to sit at a lunch table in a middle school cafeteria. All anybody wants is to find a seat at the right table, hopefully with some kids that will accept you. Nobody wants to be the kid walking around with a lunch tray, completely alone and vulnerable, unsure about where it is safe to sit.

Can you imagine the vulnerability of a woman who is genuinely struggling in her heart with what she once believed so strongly about? Can you imagine the quiet courage of the man who says, *"Well I have always believed this, but now that I hear your experience, maybe I've been wrong..."*

Make no mistake... these are world-changing words.

We can change our minds. You might change your mind one day; I might change mine; it's happened to me before. I like to think that's how Christ is at work in each of us, not finished with us yet. Oh, and it's been my experience that older people are better at changing than younger people; maybe that's because they have more experience with change.

All of us – me included - have the potential to see a little more nuance and become a little more open-minded in this world. We harbor the potential to be persuaded by a different point of view; this is how we are human, thank God.

These days, the world does not need another cafeteria where people get automatically sorted into the right tables and are expected to stay there. The world needs communities of peacemaking in which people can risk asking brave and tender questions, where people can listen to views that may be at first offensive, and yet, keep listening for the questions lurking inside the rant.

The world needs communities where people can grapple with their own conscience and say *"I am just not sure about this"* then hear the other people say, *"That's okay; we'll still be here when you decide."*

Our diversity and our potential for change are not liabilities —they're our best gifts. Disagreements do not necessarily need to send us scurrying back to our cliques. When seen through the lens of love, conflict can be the impetus to call us to one table so that whoever you are, and wherever you are on life's journey, you are welcome here.

To be honest, ever since this pandemic started, I've been concerned about how it is we will come back together, after being so physically (and often emotionally) distant from one another.

This week I've read about customers verbally abusing ice cream shop workers, and people refusing to wear masks in public when asked, and heard about moments at Big Y when angry words were exchanged when someone didn't see the arrows to follow on a grocery store floor.

We are all on edge. And that requires extra love. And as we begin a phased public re-opening in this area, we've got to turn the tide from anger and pride towards empathy and care of neighbor – or we will be in some really deep trouble.

Love is the hard work of putting your whole self into doing good for others: God and neighbor. That's it. God loves us and expects us to respond by returning that love by sharing it with others.

I believe that's the essence of the gospel of Jesus Christ. To appropriate an image Paul uses here, we are able to reflect God's love, even if it's in a mirror dimly. But it still takes effort on our part.

One more thing... we must continue to be gentle with ourselves. That is always good advice, but definitely in these times. Some of us might have high expectations for making the most of our time at home. Some of us are overwhelmed with new responsibilities or with previous responsibilities made much more difficult. Others have just had it. Please be kind and loving to yourself too. Just take a breath and focus on the next loving thing.

Love is patient; love is kind. Love is not envious, or boastful, or arrogant, or rude. Love does not insist on its own way. It is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. Love bears all things. Love believes all things, really... Love never ends. Thanks be to God. Amen.