

May 25, 2014 “The Dominant Chord” I Corinthians 13 Pt. 1

There is an old saying that runs like this: “Preachers only talk about love, when they really have nothing to say.” Actually that, of course, is not true. It is probably more a comment on the experience of the author of the saying having to do with preachers, than it is a comment on the subject of love. The apostle Paul in writing to the church in Corinth endeavoured to build up their faith and solve some of their problems by urging them to be faithful, filled with God’s Spirit and more loving in all of their relationships, inside the church and outside it.

In fact I would go so far as to float this theory. The decline of the church in North America in general, and Canada in particular may in fact be the result of this fact. It is not that we fail to believe. There is some good evidence that the church is full of people who believe. The hard question we all need to face from the top to the bottom of the organization including all ministers is this. Have we been, and are we, as loving as we should be?

The New Testament presents the evidence that the reputation of the church in the apostolic era was that they loved one another. In fact it would appear that the one thing even the church’s greatest critics felt they had to admit, was that Christians set a new standard when it came to

relationships. People near and far had heard one thing that was positive about Christians. Their reputation was summed up in the words, O how they love one another! And that is the drum that Paul the apostle is trying to beat as he pens this portion we call 1 Corinthians 13.

The introduction to the subject in fact occurs in the last verse of 1 Corinthians chapter 12. “And now I will show you the most excellent way.” To this point the apostle has been instructing the Corinthian Christians about the gifts of the Holy Spirit. He offers a list of some of the gifts the Holy Spirit can bestow on individuals within the church in order that ministry might be performed. One of the problems the Corinthian Christians had is they tended to compare their gifts in a negative way. I have a better gift than you do! Which means I must be a better Christian than you are. Paul condemns that attitude. He does for clarity’s sake list some of the gifts. And then he says, “And now I will show the more excellent way.”

He is not saying gifts of the Holy Spirit are unimportant. He is not suggesting that a sound Christian doctrinal understanding is less than important. But he is about to say, if you are going to make the claim that you are a sinner saved by the grace of God through faith in Jesus, crucified and risen, here is the best way to go about living as a man, a woman, a young person, a child who belongs to Jesus.

Paul begins by saying, “If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal.” In that time, in that culture it was a big deal to have the gift of the Spirit known as speaking in tongues. If you have never heard speaking in tongues it may sound strange to you. It is speech which is not necessarily a recognizable language. In most cases it is not Polish or Korean or Greek or Latin. If you heard it what you would recognize is that they were words...even if you could not comprehend them. You would be able to distinguish units of speech...words, sentences. If you had linguistic training you might even be able to identify paragraphs. But for the most part it consists of closed communication. Between the person speaking and the Lord.

So what is Paul’s meaning? I may be able to speak the languages of men: we know some of those. English, French, Ukrainian, Russian. Languages by which people talk to one another. I may be able to communicate in the languages of men, or the tongues of angels. Language for communicating with God and the angels. What I call a closed communication channel....ultra private. Not understandable to other people unless God sees fit to give some the gift of interpretation, in which case they would translate the message for the edification of the church. Never belittle these gifts. Never think them of

little real value. But here is where Paul begins this message on the dominant chord of love.

If I am a great communicator in the language of my people or of another group of people, as good as that is....if I am able to speak the language of God and the angels as great as that might sound in theory,....if I do not have a heart full of love toward others....I am like a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal. The King James Version says, “I am become as sounding brass or a tinkling cymbal.” Do you remember the big band sounds of the 1940’s and 50’s? Do you like the sound of a marching band? The cymbal is not supposed to “tinkle”. The cymbal is supposed to crash. It’s sound in the rhythm section of the band or the orchestra is supposed to sustain a pure sound. So why is the this cymbal tinkling, or sounding brassy, or like a sounding gong, clanging? It is broken! It is like the cracked liberty bell. It cannot ring as it was forged to ring, a clear note, a long note that carries for miles, calling people to come and worship.

So what have we got? Don’t dismiss spiritual gifts even if you do not understand them to a great extent and especially if you are not sure you have any. Don’t dismiss them. But here is the real insight....as a Christian trying to be Christ’s man, or Christ’s woman in the year of our Lord 2014, regardless of your faith, your record of good works, if we do not have a

heart full of love to share with others, we are like broken musical instruments. We can't make the music we were born and then born again to make. The sound is distorted. It is less than pure. If we can't love and be loving we are broken. That's what this chapter is about. If we cannot be loving toward one another, we are broken as Christians. We are in need of repair.

About 10 years ago on the way into the church in Pickering, Choir practice, the plastic handle on the original case for my long necked banjo broke. It literally came off in my hand. The case hit the concrete sidewalk and I heard a discordant sound I would describe as "SPROING"! I put the handle in my pocket and picked up the case, took it inside and opened it. The 5 strings were still there. The drumhead was still there....but the neck was no longer attached to the drum head. You couldn't play it. And if you tried you got no music. I had to take it to a music store in Toronto called THE 12TH FRET. They had this little tiny shop selling instruments, and this huge workshop in which they repaired instruments. And all the 12th frets horses and their men put my banjo back together again. You've heard it played. You've sung with it. Broken instruments can't do the very thing for which they were created. If we can't love it is a sign that we are broken. One of the chief signs of new life in Christ according to Paul is not how well we can talk about the faith....it is whether or not we can love like Jesus.

Verse 2 Paul says something that is, I think even more surprising. Listen. "I may have the gift of prophecy. You know what a prophet is in the Bible. They were every one of them the stars on God's team among His people. Because they knew the truth. And they were not silent. "If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries, and all knowledge." The prophets were wise. They were smart. They could read the signs of the times as well as the will of God when others were unable to do either one. "If I have faith that can move mountains." According to Jesus that is miracle working faith. Jesus said if you had faith as small as a grain of mustard seed, you could say to the mountain...remove yourself...and it would be cast into the sea. Paul says, "If I have faith that can move mountains, but have not love....I am nothing.

Underline this thought in memory. Maybe write it down when you get home. It is not his intention to say faith is unimportant. Faith in Jesus is key. But the apostle makes this uncompromising statement. If I have marvelous faith...but do not have love to give away to others.... I am nothing. The message is that love is the dominant chord in this symphony of Christian faith. It doesn't matter whether or not they know how we feel about the Bible, the apostle's creed, or the Ten commandments. If they haven't gotten the message that we love them....it's game over.

One final thought. When Jesus was crucified, dying, soon to be dead, Judas could not live with what he had done. He had sold Jesus for 30 silver coins. He tried to return the money. The Pharisees would not take it. It was blood money. Judas threw it on the ground and fled, took his own life. He could not live with himself he so regretted what he had done. Peter denied he knew Jesus. Not once. Not twice but three times during the night before the crucifixion. At dawn when Peter heard the rooster crow...he wept bitterly. Jesus is going to die on the cross. What were the reactions of Judas and Peter all about? It's not about great statements of doctrine as important as they are. Their reactions witness the fact that they get it...Jesus loves me. Jesus loves me. Jesus loves me.

And now it is up to us to leave that impression. Jesus loves you and Jesus loves me. Love one another in Jesus name like there is no tomorrow!

Let us pray;

Lord teach us to love each other. Teach us to love our neighbours. Teach us to love people of whom we are not particularly fond. Grant that we might be channels of your grace. Use us to touch others. In Jesus name we pray. Amen