

January 31, 2016

1 Cor. 13

"The Church's Grocery Cart"

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Imagine a trip to the grocery store without a grocery cart. You end up with a huge pile of food and household items, but you have no way to carry them.

Imagine a football team that makes it to the Super Bowl. But instead of wearing their team uniforms, they all decide to wear whatever they feel like for the big game.

Imagine an orchestra conductor picking up the baton, signaling the beginning of a stirring overture, but there's no music on the music stands. All the players are just making up music on their own.

Here in the church, what is the grocery cart that holds us all together? Here in the church, what's the common uniform that unifies and makes us a cohesive team? Here in the church, what's the sheet music that gives us a common, harmonious purpose?

The Bible tells us today what it is. 1 Corinthians 13 tells us that, in the church, it's love that holds us all together. It's love that unifies us. It's love, according to 1 Corinthians 13, that gives us our common purpose.

Now let's review, quickly, how we got here, to 1 Corinthians 13. Two weeks ago, we started talking about 1 Corinthians 12. We learned that all of us in the church are empowered with unique spiritual gifts distributed by God's Holy Spirit. Last week, those of you who ice-skated to church heard that God's plan is for each one of us to contribute our gifts and

talents here in the church, and to function together as a body.

And today, we learn in 1 Corinthians 13 that the key to all of this -- the key to everything in the church -- is love. All of the work we do here together requires love. All of our relationships here require love. All of our programs for children and youth and families require love. All of our teaching here at Hope, all of our fellowship and care-giving and hand-shaking and peace-sharing, all of our outreach and community service and mission work -- all of it -- requires love. Every single one of our congregational traditions, everything about our worship style, everything that happens in this church requires love.

Love is that grocery basket that holds us all -- with our unique, varying gifts and abilities and personalities -- together. Love is that uniform that we all need to wear constantly, to keep us all focused as one. Love is that musical score that we're all playing along to, ensuring that we're moving in one beautiful, harmonious direction.

Now, those aren't the exact words and images used in 1 Corinthians 13. But these words of Scripture give us same clear message. Without love, here in the church, the Bible tells us today, the rest is worthless. We're just a noisy gong, or a clanging cymbal. Without love, we are nothing, we gain nothing.

Without love, here in the church, we end up envious and boastful, arrogant and rude, insistent on our own ways, irritable, resentful, rejoicing at wrongdoings instead of rejoicing at the truth.

Without love, here in the church, everything else fades away, ceases, passes on. Without love our connection with God

and with others is like seeing in a mirror dimly, instead of seeing face to face.

Without love, in other words, the church is not the church. Love is the key. Love is the glue. Love is the common thread. Love is the grocery cart, the team uniform, the musical score. Love is the one essential, the absolute requirement. Love, and nothing else, is what makes the church of Christ the church of Christ. Love.

What kind of love? Let's be very clear on this. When we talk about love in the church, we're not just talking about any human kind of love: romantic love, sexual love, friendship love, or brotherly love. When we talk about love in Christ's church, we're not talking about any cultural/racial/ethnic/socioeconomic limitations on whom we should be willing to love. We're not talking about the kind of love that only reaches out to the people we know and like, the people we feel comfortable with, the people who meet our standards.

In 1 Corinthians 13, we read about a different kind of love. What kind of love does God want to be seen, felt, and practiced here at Hope? 1 Corinthians 13 is talking about divine love, godly love, Christ's love.

The love of Christ for his people is a sacrificial love, a forgiving love, a saving love. That's the kind of love Jesus has for you. Sacrificial: he loves you so much he was willing to die in your place. Forgiving: Jesus lovingly pardons all your sins, and restores you to a close relationship with your God. Saving: Christ's mission was to save your soul from eternal death, and his love for you has made that happen.

And, friends, that is exactly the kind of love that God wants here. That's precisely the kind of love that people need when

they walk into this church for the first time. They need to be welcomed, to feel appreciated, to know that this is a warm, thriving congregation. But, most of all, people need to experience the love of Christ. They need to learn about, they need to observe, they need to participate in a love that is sacrificial, a love that is forgiving, a love that is saving.

And we all need that, don't we? We all need the love of Christ to fill this church, to permeate our relationships, to be at the very heart and center of everything we do in this place.

There's a little song that I often sing with the preschool kids when we gather here for chapel services. It's called "Jesus' Love Is Bubbling Over." It goes like this.

Jesus' love is bubbling over,
Jesus' love is bubbling over,
Jesus' love is bubbling over,
Yes, oh yes.

Sing it with me (slow/fast/quiet).

That's what needs to happen in our church. Starting with you. Starting with me. Starting right now. In everything we do here.

Coming to church? Come with the love of Jesus bubbling over in you. Greeting newcomers and strangers? Greet them with Christ's love. Sharing your offering, or volunteering your time? Give it with love. Putting up with the noisy kid in the pew ahead of you? Reading through the prayer list? Filling out your pledge card? Singing in the choir (praise team)? Supporting the youth group at Trivia Nite? Voting on the budget this afternoon? Serving as an acolyte or usher, greeter or altar care helper?

In everything you do, first remember and celebrate the incredible love that Christ has for you. Then let the sacrificial, forgiving, saving love of Jesus bubble over in you, in our church. Because that's the key to everything here, isn't it? Love is what makes the church of Christ the church of Christ. Amen.