

## **“To a Troubled Church”**

1 Corinthians 13:1-7

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The next four Sundays, we will learn more lessons from Apostle Paul's letters. Last Sunday, we started with Romans and the theme of God's grace. This morning, I invite us to explore another of Paul's letters, the first letter to Corinthian Church. The main theme of this letter is love. Today's Scripture reading is perhaps one of the most beautiful poems in the entire Bible. The whole chapter is all about Love. It may be one of the most popular passages in the Bible for weddings. But have you ever considered this letter in its context?. Paul wrote this letter as a very confronting statement to a troubled Church in Corinth. Love is for sure good and everybody will agree that we need it, but there might be thousands of different understandings and definitions of love. Which perspective of love does Paul challenge us to learn from his letter? We need to remember that community and context are Paul's concerns, not individual's love. In other words, for Apostle Paul, love is not an abstract and romantic word. Instead it is a practical and specific guideline to advise a troubled community. For Apostle Paul, love is the key to a good understanding of what life in community requires. This morning, I hope we will learn a lesson from Apostle Paul to practice his advice of love to our church community.

What happened in the Corinthian Church? Life is full of conflicts and relationship issues. The key lies in how we handle them. There is no ideal community or church or family on earth because we are not perfect. Every community has conflict and tension in various ways. One big issue in the faith community arose out of group who spoke in tongues, especially in the young women group. They were spiritually gifted people, but the older male church leaders were concerned the young women's increasing spiritual influence in the church. There were different perspectives on spiritual gifts. The church leaders shared their concerns and asked for Paul's spiritual advice. Apostle Paul was the founder of Corinthian church and was a wise and spiritual church leader. He responded with one principle and said, “the most important thing is not a spiritual gift, but love”. Your spiritual gift will lift you up, but love can build us up together.” What was his understanding of love?

I want to share a story. A husband asked his wife, “Tell me, Dear, have you ever been in love before?” She thought a moment and replied, “No, Darling. I once respected a man for his great intelligence. I admired another for his remarkable courage. I was captivated by yet another for his good looks and

charm. But with you, well, how else could I explain it, except love?" I agree with her, do you? Stanley Hauerwas, who teaches theology and ethics at Duke Divinity School wrote the most basic law of marriage with stating, "The adventure of marriage is learning to love the person to whom you are married.... Love does not create a marriage; marriage teaches us what a costly adventure love is." This may be a true statement. Marriage doesn't promise happiness, but helps us to become more holy through learning, practicing love every day or sometimes every minute in a day. To be honest, this is my personal confession!! That is why love is so essential to sustain our married life. In a similar way, our church life can be compared to married life. There may be different perspectives, different spiritual gifts, and different ideas, but love is a key to keep us together and build up a church community as one body. Love is a force to sustain this community to be alive. Knowledge, excellence in talents, pride must be good things, but those are not able to build community. Love requires sharing, compassion, empathy and an understanding of others. These are the essence of church. Paul is trying to remind his congregation that love is the core of Christian belief.

In today's Scripture, Apostle Paul does not give us a definition but some description what love looks like. Paul's main point is that the life of the Spirit is about building up community, not about getting carried away with one's own experience in ways that undermine community. The Church leaders' concern was how they can discern between spiritual gifts and harmony in the faith community. Apostle Paul also shared his advice and encouragement to this community. Gently and politely, Paul gives the Corinthian church a warning message. "No matter what you have, if you don't have love, you are bankrupt! You are nothing without love!"

What is church? Church is a divine and earthly place commissioned to practice love in our acts for both inside faith community and outside neighborhood. The spirit of love is mutual respect, unconditional and genuine acceptance and embracing each other without judgment. Spiritual gifts are great and wonderful, but these are not the essence of church. If there is no spirit of welcoming love, it is nothing. In other words, even though we don't have spiritual gifts to make miracles, supernatural ecstatic experience, that's fine. If we have love for one another among us, we are the church. So, what makes our church to be a Christ-like church? The key is love as action for the harmony of community. Look at Paul's advice again. There is nothing for you intellectually nor for your knowledge. It always emphasizes your humble heart to serve others. If the love of God fully works within you, the Spirit of God will lead you to do something for the church- our faith community, others and our neighborhood as well.

Then how can we apply Paul's words to our church? What is your small and humble spiritual practice to love your church? Every Sunday, I am moved by our young children's assistance to prepare our Sunday service placing the hymnals on each chair. Actually it has been a big help. Why don't we think about other one small thing each of us can do that shows our love for this church community? It doesn't have to be a big thing, but something small and tiny in our actions and service that we practice for the love of community. This is what Paul advised to the Corinthian congregation and to our Fair Oaks Church as well. Amen.