

## ***A More Excellent Way***

**Text: Deuteronomy 6: 4-9; I Corinthians 13**

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**I'm curious enough to ask!** But . . . did you know that the most eloquent statement about the power of love ever to grace planet earth followed a rather prolonged and entangled squabble?

Are you aware that the passage of scripture read at the majority of weddings and quite often on Mother's Day was, in the first instance, aimed at folks who were rather like family together but had stumbled into discord?

More yet, did you know that the antidote to such squabble and discord would come in the form of a poem delivered across the Aegean Sea by the equivalent of a first-century courier?

**I am referring of course** to Paul's timeless letter of love, also called his song of love. He wrote and sent it to the Christian community gathered at Corinth because he knew their best sense of love and affection for one another and their vision and purpose for the common good had become eclipsed by smaller things.<sup>1</sup>

In the shorthand, they had fallen into honoring some people as more gifted and valuable than others; and, accordingly, diminishing those who appeared to be less so. They became stuck in their own mire believing that some were more important and had a leading margin on the others. They even held that some were spiritually superior. It was the stuff of egos gone astray: "My perspective, gift, ideas, contributions are better than yours!"

But Paul knew that such thoughts were malignant and so he reached for his pen. He wanted to remind them of something they had forgotten, to urge them back to the mind of Christ, and to offer a reset formed around the single core value of love.

**Thus, his poem begins.** "And now, I will show you still a more excellent way." Notice right up front: it's a statement of contrast as in one way compared to another; and a corrective to push them to something better. That better way was to choose love as their preferred posture rather than acting out of the lower precincts of discord.

A colleague of mine once told how his mother would communicate with her three adult children. She did so by letter too. She would write in perfect five-paragraph form. And she would also leverage the device of contrast. There would be an introduction and a conclusion usually filled with affection and love. In between she would focus a paragraph on each of them. You might imagine the worries, the concerns, and the correctives that she might offer. And my friend said that the unspoken goal among his

siblings was never to end up in the lead paragraph! All three of them understood that the first one receiving commentary from their mother was, well, a clear indication that, in her opinion, certain realignment was needed!<sup>2</sup>

Contrast can be such a good teacher, even if irritating! Back to Paul: "And now, I will show you still a more excellent way."

**But the poem quickly turns** from contrast to instruction. "If I speak in the tongues of morals and angels but have not love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal." He recycles that formula five times in three verses! "If I . . . if I . . . if I . . . if I . . . if I . . . but have not love . . ."

Mark it: he is articulating the intersection of decision and the choice to actively live with a heart and mind set on love, which always seeks the best for the other. Even, or most especially perhaps, when that choice is not easy.

I heard an amazing story this week at Congregation Beth Israel. Their featured guest was Philip Lazowski, once an 11-year-old boy from Poland who survived the holocaust by hiding from Nazi soldiers. He hid in the woods for two and a half years. He told us of the day his mother said: "My Philip: Try to survive. Try to tell the world what is going on. Try to be somebody." And then she threw him out a two-story window to set him free. She was killed not long after, but her boy, now Rabbi Philip Lazowski (nearly 90) survived to tell the story. She loved him and loved life enough to seize the urgent moment and let him go.

"If I give away all that I have, even life itself, but have not love . . . I gain nothing." And "if I" is always a choice.

**And then Paul shifts** and gets much more particular. Apparently he felt that his corrective to the power of love and choice needed some qualifying attributes. So he catalogued fifteen of the more salient characteristics of love, some in the positive, others in the negative.

Listen as Eugene Peterson translates in the Message.<sup>3</sup> "Love never gives up. Love cares for others more than for self. Love doesn't want what it doesn't have. Love doesn't strut. Love doesn't have a swelled head. It doesn't force itself on others. It isn't always me first. Love doesn't fly off the handle. It doesn't keep score of the sins of others. It doesn't revel when others grovel. Love takes pleasure in the flowering of truth. (I like that one very much.) Love trusts God, always; looks for and to the best, always; it does not look back . . ." woefully, but forward with hope.

All of this is to put some handles on this gift of love. It's also to say that, in some paradoxical way, love is countable – and these are some of the metrics.

**And then from such groundedness**, Paul goes cosmic! He turns mystic! He tosses this awesome power, this wheelhouse of human life to the breezes of spirit and mystery.

After being so corrective, so instructive, so definitive, he says that no matter how much we learn about love, we will never fully get it! And he says that because to really know love takes us to the deepest dimensions of the heart of God.

Until the day dawns when earth and heaven, spirit and matter, emotion and thought, divinity and humanity, seeking and finding deliver all of us to some new realm of harmony and wholeness, of shalom (peace) and shalem (well-being).

As for now, Paul says, “we see in a mirror dimly. We know only in part.” Or as Peterson translates again, “It’s like we are squinting in a fog, peering through a mist. But it won’t be long before the weather clears and the sun shines bright. We’ll see it all then as clearly as God sees us.”

**My dear friends** this is the sacred truth for today, good and plentiful. We can all bear the reminder. Love is the supreme good and we are all a part of it. It’s the “more excellent way” according to Paul; “the best way to know God” according to Vincent Van Gogh; “the power that unites all living beings” according to Teilhard. And it’s “the most difficult of all earthly tasks, and the work for which all other work is but preparation.” That’s Rainer Maria Rilke.

But simplest of all are words that you already possess in the pocket of your heart. Let me test that assumption with you: “So faith, hope, love abide, these three. But the greatest of these is . . . love.” Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> Leander Keck, ed. Interpretation: Volume X. Abingdon Press, 2002, p. 951-955. See also: Martin Copenhaver. Room to Grow. Eerdmans Publishing, 2015, p. 29-34.

<sup>2</sup> Martin Copenhaver. Jesus Is The Question. Abingdon Press, 2014, p. 47.

<sup>3</sup> Eugene Peterson. The Message. Navpress, 2002.