

The First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham
“Rooted and Grounded in Love: Love is the Better Way”
Rev. Dr. John Judson
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Psalm 103:1-18
1 Corinthians 13:1-13

I want to begin with three quotes from the same individual. Take a moment, listen and then let me know who said them. “Winning is not everything, but wanting to win is.” “If winning isn't everything, why do they keep score?” “Winning isn't everything, it's the only thing.” So who said these pithy statements? Yes, you are correct, it was Vince Lombardi, legendary coach of the Green Bay Packers. What I have found over the years is that there are two reactions to these statements. The first is my reaction. I want to go around and chest-bump someone. Booyah...let's get out there and win! The other reaction is people rolling their eyes and thinking, there's too much emphasis on winning. We need to be happy with just playing. Right, which works well until, say the Olympics, when a member of our nation is competing; or when they win and our national flag is raised and the anthem played. Then at least for those of us who are US citizens, we are quietly chanting, “USA, USA.” I would argue that for most of us there are moments when winning matters.

The Corinthians would have understood this perfectly, for they were about winning; about coming out on top. Just so we are clear about this we need a quick history lesson...please no nodding off. The Corinth we are looking at this morning was not the first city of Corinth. The first and ancient city of Corinth had been utterly destroyed by the Romans in 146 BC when it refused to surrender during the Roman invasion. One hundred years later, Julius Caesar founded a new Corinth first because its location as a trading center was too valuable to lose and second because it was a place where decommissioned soldiers could go. What this meant was that Corinth was a “new world” if you will. It was a place where fortunes could be made or lost. It was a place where an ordinary person, with grit and determination could become wealthy. It was a place where winners were rewarded. And because of this it became the second wealthiest city in the Empire. Winning was indeed not everything, it was the only thing in Corinth...booyah.

This would not have been a problem for the Apostle Paul, except for one small detail; the Corinthians brought this same attitude into the church. Everyone was out to win, to prove that they were better than everyone else in the church; that they were top dog. This winning took several different forms. First, it became a competition to see who was best based on who they followed. Some followed Peter, others Paul, and others a guy named Apollos. Each group declared themselves the winners because they knew that they were better than everyone else. Next it came to wealth. Those who had wealth would flaunt it in front of the poor in the church, essentially declaring that they, the wealthy, had won. They were better. Finally they competed over who had the best and most important spiritual gifts. Though there were a multiplicity of spiritual gifts, each of which was important, people argued that theirs was the best; especially those who spoke in tongues. They knew that they were the winners. And so as you can

imagine, this sense of winning is everything, was slowly but surely destroying the church. It was tearing it apart.

This then is the situation that Paul is addressing with this thirteenth chapter of his letter. This portion of this letter is neither a wonderful treatise on soft furry kitten love, nor is it a set of lyrics for a First Century love song. This is Paul's reminder to the Corinthians that the ground of being for the Christian community is not winning, that it is love. He begins by reminding them that without love all of their other gifts are meaningless. It doesn't matter if one can speak in tongues, prophecy, have great Biblical knowledge and incredible with...without love those are of no use. He then describes what this love looks like. It is patient, kind, humble and other centered. It celebrates the victories of others and the truth even when it hurts. It is willing to suffer anything for the other. Paul then gets all over them for acting like children who are always out to win, rather than mature adults who know how to love. And Paul does this because he gets it that this is how God works. God is the one who shows steadfast love. God is the one who forgives. God is the one who is self-giving. God is the one who sent God's only Son to save the world. The best gift then; the only spiritual gift that mattered for Paul then, was love, a gift that was given to every believer by Jesus Christ. Love wasn't everything. It was the only thing.

I realize that there are moments when making love the only thing is difficult because we live in such a winner take all world. When we are in competition in business to build the best and sell the most. When we are in competition with others for jobs and promotions. When we are in competition to be at the top of the class. When we are in competition on the athletic fields. Yet it is still possible to be rooted and grounded in love. It is possible to let love be real in our lives. And I know this is possible because I have seen it in Ernest and Sarah Krug, to whom we say goodbye this morning. Now, Ernest and Sarah, what I am about to say is not intended to give you the big head...to prove that you have won the, let's show how people to love contest. I say this simply because you have shown us what love looks like. You have been patient and kind. You haven't ever pushed your own agenda but have supported that of others. You have given countless hours at hospitals and hospices, in meetings and worship, in private conversations and larger groups. You two have been a model for us that shows you can be successful in life and at the same time allowed love to be your aim. Thank you for being a model for the rest of us.

At the same time I want to thank all of you for showing what love looks like. On this, my sixth anniversary with you, I have found you to be a congregation in which love lives. I say this because there are not small factions vying for power. There are no individuals who have to have their own way. And conversely, there are so many of you who share your time, energy and gifts with others in acts of love and compassion. You are a congregation that shows me what love looks like.

My challenge for you then this week is this, to ask yourselves, "How am I letting love guide all that I say and all that I do? How am I letting love be everything?"