

First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham
“Growing Our Faith: Being Loving”
Dr. John Judson
November 18, 2018

1 Corinthians 12:31-13:7

She looked as frustrated as I felt. She had spent the previous three weeks, eight hours a day, six days a week, trying to teach me Tagalog, but somehow it had yet to take hold in my brain. When I signed up for the Peace Corps, I was excited about going to the Philippines, and making a difference. What had not occurred to me was that my brain was not one of those wired to learn a new language...especially one that had virtually no connection to English, Spanish or other romance languages. Sentences such as “*Lakaran ako sa tendehan*”, or “*come with me to the store*” did not flow out of my brain and off my tongue. The problem was that to be sworn in as a volunteer and stay for my two years, I had to pass the language test. The gift I was given was that the woman teaching me refused to give up. She believed I was supposed to be there, and through her sheer will, she taught me enough Tagalog to pass the test and become an effective volunteer.

Let me ask, how many of you have had a teacher like that. Someone who cared so much about you that they were willing to do almost anything to help you succeed? If you have, then you can understand the passion the Apostle Paul had for teaching the Corinthians what it meant to be Jesus people. I say that because the Corinthians had signed up for Paul’s basic Jesus People Course in how to follow the risen, reigning savior. As part of that course they had to learn a new language...the language of the love of God in Jesus Christ. This was a new language for the Corinthians because they had spent their lives speaking the language of Empire; the language of power, domination, class and cruelty. And unfortunately, even after several years of practice, they were still struggling with the language of love as much as I struggled with my Tagalog. We know this because the Corinthians were almost as selfish, self-centered, arrogant, rude, power-hungry and jealous of one another as they were when they began learning this new language. But Paul was not about to give up. And in this thirteenth chapter, he decided to give them a crash course in God’s language of love in Jesus Christ.

The first lesson was that love was patient and kind. Every five years Cindy and I try and go on a cruise for our anniversary. When we were on our cruise for our 30th anniversary, I was waiting in line for breakfast and lusting over what can only be described as a mountain of bacon awaiting me. In front of me was a woman who had eyed one particular, piece of bacon that she wanted. She said to the server, “I want that piece of bacon.” He pointed to one and she replied, “Not that one, this one.” Becoming angry, she said, “Can’t you see! That one right there.” Once again, when she pointed, and he couldn’t discern the exact piece of bacon, she loudly implied that he was incompetent and ought to get another job. The Corinthians would have appreciated the bacon lady. They would have because the Corinthians were intolerant of and impatient with those who violated what they saw to be the social norms and would respond with withering criticism. We know this because they made fun of and often refused to listen to Paul because he was not a great orator, not very good looking and was Jewish. This criticism of one another was tearing the church apart. What Paul tried to teach them was that the language of love was to be patient with, and kind toward, those who were different and did not meet the conception of perfection. They were to be patient and kind because Jesus had been and continued to be patient and kind to the criticizing Corinthians. Thus, if the

Corinthians were to be Jesus People, speaking the language of love, they were to exchange their conception of perfection for patience, and their criticism for kindness. Consider for a moment what a different world we would live in if we all learned and spoke the language of patience and kindness.

The second lesson was that love is not envious, boastful or arrogant. Years ago, my parents received their first ever Christmas letter, long before they were in vogue. It was from one of dad's Marine Corps buddies and was filled with the wonderful tales of this man's brilliant and successful children. My parents just chuckled, but I got indignant. First, I was jealous of their success and second, I was sure that my brothers were better and smarter than his kids. In other words, I mixed those two sides of the same coin, jealousy on the one side and boastful on the other, meaning jealousy and boasting go together because we wouldn't boast if we were not jealous of someone else. This mixing of jealousy and boasting was at the heart of one of the most contentious issues within the Corinthian church; that is, whose spiritual gifts were best? As a reminder from last week, in the previous chapter Paul had described how every Jesus Person was given certain spiritual gifts to help build up the church. Everyone had at least one and no one had them all. Rather than teaching people to celebrate each other's gifts, Paul's lesson created a competition to see whose gifts were better. It was a "My gifts are better than your gifts" situation and was tearing the church apart. Paul reminded his students that competition was the language of Empire. Jesus love language would set aside competition and allow for the celebration of everyone's gifts. This love language would allow people to see each gift as unique and special and necessary for the family. Consider for a moment what a different world this would be if instead of speaking the language of envy and arrogance, we spoke the language of celebration and appreciation.

The third and final lesson is that love rejoices in truth. I'm not sure how many of you noticed that we had an election a couple of weeks ago. I'm also not sure if you noticed there were political ads, most them saying unkind things about people. And finally, how many of you noticed that many of these commercials simply lied. It made me wonder what lengths we have become willing to go to insure victory. Unfortunately, the Corinthians would have had no problem with this scorched earth campaigning, because they did whatever it took to win. I say this because the Corinthians were incapable of working out disputes among themselves. Rather than trying to find the truth or at least an agreeable solution to their arguments, they sued each other. Yes, that's right, they would take each other to civil court and if we believe Paul, lie about the facts of the matter because winning was everything. And my friends, this was a church of probably no more than 30-40 people. Once again then, Paul tries to teach them that the language of love is not about winning, but that it is about seeking the truth and sacrificially serving one another. It is about seeking justice which builds up the community. This is the language of the love of God in Jesus Christ because it is the love God offers the world, calling for justice for all and a willingness to send Jesus into the world to give his life as a ransom for all. Love seeks the best for all. Consider for a moment what a different world we would live in if instead of arguing, we spoke the language of self-giving rather than of winner-take-all.

We live in a world where the language of Empire is all around us. This makes learning and using the language of love one of the most important things we can do. My challenge to you this week then is to ask ourselves, "How am I learning and practicing speaking the language of the love of God in Jesus Christ to everyone I meet in every place that I go?"