

TAKE THE HIGHWAY

Sermon, January 31, 2016
Text: I Corinthians 12:31-13:7

"If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels,
but have not love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal."
I Corinthians 13:1

Literally translated from the Greek, the phrase "resounding gong" actually reads "a banging brass" ... gongs were normally made of brass, hence the translator's decision to go with the word "gong." However, the Greek term here doesn't necessarily mean "gong." Corinth was famous in antiquity for brass-making, particularly for brass pots and kettles used in kitchenware. In fact, it was known throughout the civilized world as a center for brass. If you wanted quality kitchenware, you went to Corinth; it was THE major trade of the city. It was roughly similar to Corning, NY; quality kitchenware in the United States comes from the glass factory of Corning ... who hasn't used Corningware? Just a little side note ... Pyrex was patented 1915 in Corning. In 1957, that white ceramic material now known as Corningware was created quite by accident when a furnace malfunctioned, causing the glass to be heated to 900 C , or 1652 degrees Fahrenheit. It was thought that it should have melted, but it didn't; it just turned a milky white color! When lab researcher Dr. Stookey took the hot, milky white glass out of the furnace with tongs, he accidentally dropped it on the floor. To his amazement, it didn't break! He quickly named and patented the new glass as Pyroceram.

Back to Corinth. Were you to travel to Corinth, you wouldn't need a GPS, nor would you have to ask directions, in order to find to the open-air brass market. All you would have to do is stand still for a moment and listen. Imagine taking a big thick solid brass sheet and banging on it with a hammer hard enough to shape it. That would make a lot of noise! Well, that is how brassware was fashioned. Brass pots and kettles were neither poured nor molded; they were noisily *beaten* and banged and pounded into shape by big burly men standing and repeatedly hammering on a sheet of thick brass with force hard enough to dent and bend the metal. Now imagine well over two hundred such craftsmen, in one concentrated open-air area like the Corinthian brass market, banging away like mad fashioning these brass pots and kettles ... the racket would be absolutely deafening! ¹ Paul is saying, *"Even if I speak in the most eloquent and educated tongues of men, and even if I somehow manage to speak in the heavenly language of angels, but have no love, I am going to sound just like that irritating, earsplitting, headache-inducing racket down there in the marketplace!"*

Chapter 13 probably should really begin with verse 31 of the previous chapter; which talks about the Body of Christ and the gifts of those who make up that Body, and then ends with, *"But eagerly desire the greater gifts. And now I will show you the most excellent way."* It would be warranted to translate this, *"Desire the **higher** gifts And I will show you the **high** (or, **highest**) way," or "I'll show you the **high road**." As if Paul is saying, *"Let's take the high road and not take the low road. We may not get to Scotland afore ye, but this really is the most excellent way!"**

Every Maundy Thursday we remember Jesus new "mandatum," His new commandment ... for those who might not know, that's where the name "Maundy" comes from. John 13:34--*I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this shall people know you are my disciples, if you love one another.* "Now, how can Jesus command this? How can someone command you to have a feeling? Well, He can, because love is primarily a verb, not a noun. It is primarily something you do, not something you "have" or "feel;" as anyone who has honored the marriage covenant will tell you, it is something you do for better for worse, for richer for poorer, in sickness and in health, and whether you feel like it or not! And how do we become good at something we are to do? Any good Corinthian brass worker, any good pianist, any good painter, any good athlete, any good butcher, baker or candlestick maker will tell you: You must practice! A talent has to be worked at if you are going to do it well. The kind of love Jesus is talking about is a learned behavior, it has to be worked at, it has to be practiced, it has to be nurtured until it becomes second nature; the loving emotion often follows. Without love, Paul says, nothing else matters.

Paul continues: Love is patient. Love is kind. Love is not envious, nor is it boastful, nor is it proud or arrogant. Love is never, ever, ever rude. Love is not self-seeking; it does not insist on its own way. Love is not easily angered ... i.e., it is not easily provoked; it is not irritable, touchy, easily offended. Love keeps no record of wrongs. Love is not resentful. Love does not take delight in evil ... i.e., it never delights in hearing about evil, never delights in spreading gossipy reports about evil, never delights in hearing of others involvement in evil ... but love always rejoices in the *truth*, the *highest* and the *good*. I can remember back in high school when a retreat speaker encouraged us to try two devotional techniques when reading this chapter. First, replace the word "love" with "God." Read through the entire chapter that way: *"God is patient. God is kind. God keeps no record of wrongs,"* and so on. Next: replace "love" with your

¹ Paul Through Mediterranean Eyes: Cultural Studies in 1 Corinthians, Kenneth Bailey, p. 360, InterVarsity Press, Downers Grove, IL, c. 2011

name, then try and live up to these godly ideals: *"Steve is patient. Steve is kind. Steve keeps no record of wrongs. Steve is not easily angered (and Steve is saying this while his children aren't here to tell you otherwise)."* Then, verse 7: *"Love always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres."*

"Love always protects." I say this at almost every wedding, that authentic love desires to protect the beloved; it will never, ever deliberately give the other cause to fear. It does not intimidate, it does not threaten, it does not menace, it does not abandon, it does not ridicule. It protects. This also conveys a sense of covering, as in protection from exposure. Genuine love covers, it doesn't take delight in exposing the foibles and shortcomings and weaknesses of the beloved in public, it takes no delight in spreading someone's faults and shortcomings around like so much gossipy manure. Of course, there ARE times when love demands exposure. The violent spouse must be restrained, the abusive parent must be stopped, the embezzling bookkeeper must be arrested, the philandering preacher must be booted out of the pulpit (*this is not a confession, by the way*) ... in order to protect from greater harm. The wisdom of authentic love is to know when to cover and when to expose. Unfortunately, many of us are tempted on the side of exposure rather than cover-up; we can't wait to pass on the latest gossip ... the juicier it is, the more we want to broadcast it. But genuine love's impulse is to cover, to protect and not to unnecessarily expose wounds and faults for the sake of the beloved as well as for the sake of the community. Love takes the high way. Covering, by the way, allows healing to take place ... if we keep ripping off the covering over a wound to expose it, the wound is at greater risk for a spreading infection, and it will take much longer to heal. The protection of love is like a covering bandage.

"Love always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres." Authentic love is always eager to believe the best, not the worst. When you trust, you put your faith in the beloved, which can be a risky thing to do. *"Love one another,"* Jesus says to His disciples, *"As I have loved you."* And that involves trust. Have we betrayed Jesus' trust? Have we disappointed Him? Have we caused Him hurt? Of course we have. But He forgives, and He loves us still ... *and* He commands we love each other in like manner. Genuine love is willing to give the second chance, and third, and fourth. Just as Jesus loved you. And that may backfire, but that's the risk we take because that's the risk Jesus took with us ... who here hasn't been deeply hurt by someone you trusted? Taking the high way involves the very real but Christ-like risk of giving each other the benefit of the doubt, always hoping the best and persevering in that hope. And by the way, that is such a witness to an unbelieving, cynical, hope-less world that has been hurt too often and trusts no one.

You know, Jesus didn't say, *"Because you love one another people will know you are My disciples."* He said, *"If you love one another, people will know you are My disciples.."* An "if" is involved. If we obey His command to love each other, then we display genuine discipleship. However, since it is a command, it can be violated. If we expect others to know we are Christians, if we expect others to believe our faith is genuine, then we must love one another. Jesus gives people the right to judge whether you and I are Christians on the basis of our observable love toward each other. Now we can and do fail in our love. No one except Jesus Himself has ever lived and not failed (*as I've said before, sinners generally fall into one of two categories: they are men or they are women*). But we also often succeed in love; many of us here this morning, myself included, can readily testify to the love, concern and compassion we have witnessed or personally experienced in the fellowship of this congregation. Yes, we do at times fail. And when we fail, we must ask forgiveness. If I fail in my love toward you, it does not prove I am not a Christian. What Jesus is saying, though, is if I do not show love toward another Christian, then others have the Christ-given right to make the judgment that I am not a Christian. That's the divinely sanctioned litmus test -- If others do not see this love, they may rightly conclude, *"This person is not a Christian."* Genuine love exercised and displayed gives our faith credibility. In the little time remaining, I'd like to quickly comment on the last verse of the chapter: *"Meanwhile, these three remain: Faith, Hope and Love. But the greatest of these is love."*

(The following was left out due to time constraints, but I include it here: According to Paul, the primary Christian virtue is **not** faith, the primary Christian virtue is **love**. Paul's message is that all of the spiritual gifts, *including* orthodox faith, are meaningless and empty without love. Yes, believing focuses on faith and intellectual assent; but we too often place faith and intellectual assent higher than love. We insist on our way of thinking, our way of understanding, our way of believing; often we assume a posture of arrogant and unloving superiority toward those with whom we disagree, and we criticize each other and quarrel and divide up. Paul does not discount the importance and necessity of a love properly rooted in truth. Love with no faith content is easily perverted, misdirected and is often destructive. No one was more aware of that than the Corinthian Christian; in the center of Corinth was a temple to the goddess Aphrodite. This temple employed over 2,000 temple prostitutes. The Corinthian converts knew from painful experience that indulging in "love" and sensuality more often than not lead to the perverted result of making one increasingly in-sensitive, increasingly un-able to genuinely love, as the sensually indulgent found their hearts increasingly callused and hardened. Properly understood, correctly defined, and faithfully practiced, though, love is the primary virtue of the Christian. Properly understood, "lover" would be a much better description of the serious practicing Christian than the term "believer.")

You know, the gift of faith, as important as it is, is temporary. There will come a day when we no longer need it, for one day we will see God face to face. That is what our dearly departed loved ones in the Church Triumphant are experiencing right now. So faith is transient; and so is hope. There will come a day when you and I will have no need for hope, for our hope will be completely fulfilled. We cannot do without hope now, to be sure; the gift of hope sustains us in this world. But once hope's object is realized, we will no longer need it. But love is different; of the three, love alone is eternal. For, as the Bible tells us, God is love. And when we walk in the way of love, when we practice the art of love, when we endeavor to love one another, we are taking the highest road there is ... a high way that continues right into heaven and the eternal presence of Love Himself.