

TAKING THE HIGH ROAD

Sermon, February 6, 2022

Texts: I Corinthians 12:31-13:7, 13; I John 4:7-12

"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" ... however, gongs were normally made of brass, hence the translator's decision to go with the word "gong" which also logically pairs with "cymbal." Being a product of my generation, often when I read this passage I think of an offbeat but popular TV show from the seventies called "The Gong Show." (*Basically, each show presented a competition of amateur performers of often dubious talent, with a panel of three celebrity judges. If any judge considered an act to be particularly bad, they could force it to stop by striking a large gong. Any act that survived without being gonged was given a score by each of the three judges to determine a final winner. I belatedly discovered they attempted a remake a few years back, but I don't think it lasted the season.*) As if Paul were saying, "If I put on a superb show, a fantastic performance, a convincing display of oratory, but have not love or do it without love, you can just **GONG** my Christian act." Now, that does capture some of the spirit of Paul's intention. However, the Greek term here doesn't necessarily mean "gong." Again, literally it reads "a banging (or sounding) brass."

Corinth was famous in antiquity for brass-making, particularly brass pots and kettles and other kitchenware. In fact, it was known throughout the civilized world as a center for brass. Brass was THE major trade of the city. Were you to travel to Corinth, to find the open-air brass market you wouldn't need a GPS, nor would you have to ask directions. 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 sheets of thick brass with force hard enough to dent and bend and shape the metal. Now imagine a few *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 (or, do so without love), I am going to sound no better than that irritating, disturbing, earsplitting, headache-inducing racket down there in the marketplace!"

Our reading selection began with the final verse of the previous chapter, as you know, the verse numbers and chapter divisions were not part of Paul's original letter. Chapter 12 talks about the Body of Christ and the gifts of those people of the church who make up that Body, and then ends with, "But earnestly desire the higher gifts. And now I will show you the *most excellent way*." It would be warranted to translate this, "And I will show you the *HIGHEST way*," or "the *highest highway*." As if Paul were saying, "Let's take the highest road and not take the low road. We may not get to Scotland afore ye, but this really is the *MOST EXCELLENT way!*" (... on the bonnie, bonnie banks of Loch Lomond.)

Every Maundy Thursday we remember Jesus new "mandatum," His new commandment ... that's where the name "Maundy" comes from, by the way; *mandatum* is the Latin word for *commandment*. 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 someone command you to have a feeling? Well, Jesus can, because love is primarily a verb, not a noun. It is an action word, it is primarily something you DO, not primarily something you "have" or "feel;" as anyone who has honored their marriage vows will tell you, it is something you DO for better for worse, for richer for poorer, in sickness and in health, whether you *feel* like it or not! And how do we become really good at something we are to do? Any good Corinthian brass worker, any good musician, any good painter, any good athlete will tell you: You gotta 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, an acquired skill; it has to be worked at, it has to be practiced, it has to be nurtured until it becomes second nature. By the way, the loving emotion often accompanies or, at times, follows the loving action. But without active love, Paul says, NOTHING. ELSE. MATTERS.

Paul continues to define love in action: 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, nor touchy, nor 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 *highest* and affirms the *good*.

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

During the Time with the Children, I had mentioned I could remember from back in my high school days when a retreat speaker encouraged us to try two devotional techniques when reading this chapter. First, since I John 4:8 tells us, "God is love," read through the entire chapter replacing the word "love" with "God" if you want a fuller understanding of God's nature. "God is patient. God is kind. God keeps no record of wrongs. God is not easily angered," and so on through the chapter. Next: replace the word "love" with YOUR name; since we are called to be imitators of God ... and then try to live accordingly: "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)."

"Love always protects." Something I say at almost every wedding is that authentic love desires to protect the beloved; it will never, ever deliberately give the beloved 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. In order to protect from greater harm, 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 personal confession, by the way. ALL philanderers need to be exposed for the greater good and protection of all!*). 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 to not unnecessarily expose wounds and faults for the sake of the beloved as well as for the sake of the community. LOVE TAKES THE HIGH ROAD. The protection of love is like a bandage cover that allows healing to take place ... if we keep ripping off the covering over a wound to expose it, the wound will be at greater risk of festering infection, and will take much longer to heal.

"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 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 road 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.

To be clear, 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."* A conditional "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. But no doubt about it, 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 often 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. Nowadays, it's even controversial to say THAT, in these days of "preferred pronouns," but ... that's another sermon!*). But we do 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 through many in this congregation. Yes, we do at times fail. We often succeed, but we do sometimes 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 and can then **"GONG"** my Christian performance! 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 gives our faith credibility.

In the little time remaining, I'd like to quickly comment on the very last verse of chapter 13. *"Meanwhile, these three remain: Faith, Hope and Love. But the greatest of these is love."* You know, 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 Lois-Belle Crankshaw is experiencing now, as she went on to the Church Triumphant two weeks ago to join her dear twin sister Joan-Sandra who left this world last July, as well as their husbands Jack and Pete who departed in 2013 ... and eighteen years ago today, February 6, 2004 their mother Ida Hayman's funeral was held here. The family is now together again.*) 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 and utterly 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. Of the three, faith, hope and love, love alone is eternal. For, as John tells us, God is love.

And when imitate the One Who is love, when we walk in the way of love, when we practice the art and the skill of love, when we love one another, we are taking the highest road there is ... the high way to heaven.