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The National Presbyterian Church

Building a Church Out of Words

1 Corinthians 13

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Occasionally, following a wedding service, someone will ask, “Where can I get a copy of that thing you read about love?” The person speaks, of course, about Paul’s words from the thirteenth chapter of First Corinthians.

“It’s in the Bible,” I say, “First Corinthians 13.”

“Really!” People are amazed. They seem astonished that something so perfectly lovely could be found in the Bible.

Even Christians are sometimes surprised to discover these words come from the Apostle Paul. Many people think of Paul as a sort of theological thug who subverted the sweet, gentle religion Jesus began. Of all the writers of scripture

Paul might seem the least likely to have penned this magnificent testimony to love.

So lovely is the thirteenth chapter that people raid the letter and clip it out. They needlepoint it to hang in the kitchen. At Montreat one summer I saw it on a t-shirt.

Lifting these words from the letter is understandable, but regrettable. Detached from the letter the thirteenth chapter begins to sound sentimental, some idealistic vision of love remote from the grittiness of human relationships. We overlook the fact that these beautiful words about love are part of a lengthy, sustained conversation written to people whose fingers were around each other's throats.

If there is one thing I want you clearly to understand this morning it is this: the thirteenth chapter of First Corinthians comes between the twelfth and fourteenth chapters. Let me explain

In the twelfth chapter of First Corinthians Paul develops his analogy of the church as the body of Christ, a body of many diverse parts. Paul explains, "If the foot would say, 'Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body, that would not make it any less a part of the body,' and "The eye cannot say to the hand, 'I have no need of you,' nor again the head to the feet, 'I have no need of you.'" The fact of the matter was that this is what members of the church in Corinth were saying. Some were saying to themselves, "I really don't belong here," "This is no place for me." Some looked over their shoulders at others and said, "I have no need of you." That's the conversation reported in the twelfth chapter.

The fourteenth chapter continues this concern for how we speak in the church. Some speak in tongues, other speak words of prophecy, but what is the point? "Those who speak in a tongue build up themselves, but those who prophesy build up the church." That's the point: the building up of the church. Paul goes on in the fourteenth chapter—we didn't read all of this in worship because it gets too long—to

say, “Let all things be done for building up.” The Epistle to the Ephesians makes the matter even clearer: “Let no evil talk come out of your mouths, but only what is useful for building up, as there is need, so that your words may give grace to those who hear” (Eph 4:29). ***Building up*** is the criterion for speaking in the house of God.

The story was told among the Hasidic Jews of Eastern Europe that disciples of a wise rabbi came to him to ask, “Rabbi, you teach us when we pray to say, ‘O God, you spoke and the world came to be.’ Rabbi, why should we not just say, ‘O God, you created the world?’ That would be simpler.” The rabbi answered them, “We pray, ‘O God, you spoke and the world came to be,’ so that you may never underestimate the power of words to call whole worlds into being.”¹

By our words—the words we choose and the manner in which we speak them—we do call whole worlds into being. We speak and construct a habitable world where people can grow and mature in strength and wisdom, or we speak in such a way that our world is small and mean, offering no space to grow, no room for forgiveness.

Living in families offers proof enough that we create worlds through our words. You hear your son criticizing his teammates with exactly the same invective you used on him when he struck out three times last week, and hearing those awful echoes you don't wonder where he learned language like that, you know. You overhear your daughter scolding her dolls with the same words you scolded her, and you could bite your tongue. Do words have no statute of limitations? They live on, constructing new worlds, habitable or inhabitable, hospitable or inhospitable, filled with love or seething with bitterness.

Sometimes it is not the words, however, but the lack of them. Visiting a friend years ago I was shocked to hear that a young couple we had both known and liked had

divorced. “What happened?” I asked. My friend explained, “It’s so silly. They had an angry fight one night, and they had no vocabulary for forgiveness.”

Forgiveness is not an easy dialect to master, some people never succeed. Forgiveness is not simple, but either we live and work together in forgiveness or we have to find another Bible, another faith and another God, and that’s really tough. Our scriptures shout forgiveness seventy times seven louder than any word of judgment. We remind ourselves each week “In Jesus Christ we are forgiven” so that we may learn a vocabulary for forgiveness and a grammar of grace.

We concern ourselves with a grammar of grace and a vocabulary for forgiveness because we have serious work to do. We are creating a world, we are building a people. We speak as people who have been given the task of building each other, building a place where we can be at home together. That is what is at stake in this language: home. The Greek word translated “build up” includes in it the Greek word for “home.” What we are to be building by our manner of speech is a place where people can live in security, a place where people can grow and learn to love one another. The task is building up people.

The language of our culture suggests something similar but in exactly the opposite direction. When we use language to demean or diminish or destroy another person, we speak the language of the “put down.” Some language “builds up,” other language “puts down.” One has only to watch family situation comedies on television to see this language in action. Television families apparently show their affection by carving each other up with words. Experienced viewers learn that when someone says “I love you,” you wait for the punch line to the joke. These shows ought to include the customary disclaimers: “Don’t try this at home, kids,” or “These are not real parents, only actors pretending to be

parents,” because no families could long tolerate constant put-downs.

The criterion for speech among the people of God is, “Does it build up our community or tear it down?” Our words, our language, our gestures will do one or the other. “Let all things be done for building up,” the Apostle Paul reminds the community in Corinth. When Paul says that, however, he is not merely telling the Corinthians how they ought to behave, but he is reminding them of what God's Holy Spirit is doing among them. The building up of the people of God is the agenda of the Holy Spirit, and the Spirit accomplishes this by inspiring (or in-spiring) people with various gifts, including the gift of speech. Paul believes talk which builds up is utterly unmistakable. You can recognize it by its effects.

Paul invites us to participate in the Spirit's agenda by selecting our words and phrases and sentences in such a way that people are built up, not put down. To put it simply, Paul invites us to love. Chapter twelve ends, “I will show you a still more excellent way.” The unexplored option, the impossible possibility Paul offers both to people who feel they really don't belong and also to people who wish they would just go away. To those who are saying “I do not belong,” and to those who are saying “I have no need of you,” Paul says, “I will show you a still more excellent way.” He goes on to sing the praises of love which “is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful... It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.”

Love is uncalculated. “[Love] does not insist on its own way,” which is to say: Love doesn't measure itself out in terms of “What I want” or “What we need” or even “What I think is right.”

Being right was a very big deal around the Corinthian Church. Being right excuses all manner of bad behavior. If

you're right you don't have to be gracious because you're right. If you're right you transcend ordinary standards of civility and courtesy. If you are right your anger is a righteous anger. It is a holy service to strike out against what is wrong. Isn't it nice to wrap ourselves in our own warm, cozy rightness?

I love watching Jeopardy on television: the satisfaction of having the right answer. The pleasure goes by so quickly. "As for knowledge," Paul says, "it will come to an end." The problem with being right is that it has no staying power. It wears out and rather quickly. "Faith, hope, and love abide, these three," but being right is not mentioned. In his letter to the Galatians counts out the seven fruits of the Spirit: "love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control" [Gal 5:22] It doesn't look like being right even makes "the top ten." If you think the price of gas is getting out of control, the price of being right is even more exorbitant.

Earlier Paul reminded the Corinthians of all the slogans they were throwing around about food sacrificed to idols and said in effect: okay you're right, but what good is your rightness to your neighbor.

Where do we get this notion that being right is so important? Not from the Scriptures. "Faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love."

Love seeks the other's good. It's not "What I want" or "What I need" or even "What I think is right." Love is the self-forgetful enactment of Jesus words to lose self in order to find self. We discard our needy, clamoring, never satisfied self in order to receive God's gift of a loving self.

Paul demonstrates how to build up by building up the virtue of love above all else. Out of words carefully chosen and marvelously arranged he creates a world in which people

may live and grow, and grow strong and loving. As he speaks of love Paul builds a home and invites us to come in, find a home for ourselves and learn the gracious and hospitable ways of God. “When I was a child,” says Paul, “I spoke like a child, I reasoned like a child.” I had to grow up to know what love is, he says, inviting us into a safe place where we can grow in our ability to love one another.

That's what really matters, after all. After all the words are spoken, after all the speeches are said, after all the sermons are preached what really matters, what endures, is love. Not buildings or preachers or even churches in the sense of an organization. What endures and stands even the erosion of time are those selfless acts in which people reach out beyond their own wants and needs, beyond even what is best for them, and show God's great love by serving others. That is what matters. That counts for something. “Now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love.”

Sunday Worship at 8, 9:15 & 11 a.m.

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ⁱ From somewhere in Martin Buber, *Tales of the Hasidim*, trans. Olga Marx (New York: Schocken Books, 1975).