

January 31, 2016
Sermon for 4th Sunday after the Epiphany
St Peter Lutheran Church
Bowie, TX
Larry Knobloch, Pastor
1 Corinthians 12:27–13:13

J.J.- Jesu Juva—Help me, Jesus

1 Corinthians 12:27–13:13 (ESV)

²⁷ Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it. ²⁸ And God has appointed in the church first apostles, second prophets, third teachers, then miracles, then gifts of healing, helping, administrating, and various kinds of tongues. ²⁹ Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Are all teachers? Do all work miracles? ³⁰ Do all possess gifts of healing? Do all speak with tongues? Do all interpret? ³¹ But earnestly desire the higher gifts. And I will show you a still more excellent way. ¹ If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. ² And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. ³ If I give away all I have, and if I deliver up my body to be burned, but have not love, I gain nothing. ⁴ Love is patient and kind; love does not envy or boast; it is not arrogant ⁵ or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; ⁶ it does not rejoice at wrongdoing, but rejoices with the truth. ⁷ Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. ⁸ Love never ends. As for prophecies, they will pass away; as for tongues, they will cease; as for knowledge, it will pass away. ⁹ For we know in part and we prophesy in part, ¹⁰ but when the perfect comes, the partial will pass away. ¹¹ When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I gave up childish ways. ¹² For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I have been fully known. ¹³ So now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; but the greatest of these is love.

Grace, mercy and peace be to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ!

Amen.

The headlines read: “Members of a historic church . . . near the U.S. Capitol are embroiled in a bitter dispute—which recently erupted in a brawl outside the sanctuary” (Hamil Harris, Bill Broadway, *Washington Post*, June 20, 1998).

Jesus said “*On this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell will not overcome it*” (Mt 16:18). Indeed, the gates of hell have not prevailed against it—in fact, no outside forces have succeeded in conquering the church. But is there ever danger from within the body of Christ itself?

Can the walls begin to break down from the inside?

Paul’s words about love give us an insight into the Master Builder’s plan for the church and the difficulties that come about when love is missing.

Let’s start with the foundation. God provided apostles, prophets, teachers, miracle workers, healers, administrators, and those who could speak in tongues as a foundation row of bricks for His church.

At Peter’s Pentecost sermon the Holy Spirit began to work in the hearts of thousands. Paul’s missionary efforts laid the groundwork for the early expansion of the church. All Christians today are built on the foundation laid by Jesus’ disciples as they went into all the world in response to his command.

But later members of the church located above the foundation row are included as well!

Paul says *each one of us individually* is also a member of Christ's body. We upper bricks are as necessary to the body as the foundation row.

No member's gifts may be excluded as being less important or unnecessary.

When a cathedral was built in Milan, Italy, the story is told of a little girl who claimed, "I helped *build* this cathedral." When bystanders asked her what she meant, she replied, "I brought lunch for my father while he was working on the building." In the same way, God uses each individual's gifts—great or small—to accomplish his unique purposes in building the church.

Each gift spelled out in the blueprint is necessary for the final constructed church! How could the Word of God have come to us today without specially "sent ones" such as the apostles?

How would we know the Word without God's spokesmen, the prophets? How could we understand the Word without teachers?

Throughout the centuries these and other gifts have been used by the Spirit to advance the Gospel and thus are part of the foundation.

So far we have the blueprint, the foundation, and the individual stones. Is anything missing?

When it comes to buildings, nobody thinks much about the mortar between the bricks, do they? It's just sort of there. But if it is true that a wall can only be as durable as the mortar holding its bricks together, then we can appreciate that one of the most important qualities of mortar is its ability to serve as a flexible buffer between individual bricks or stones.

It keeps them from shifting against each other and breaking up in the process.

In the same way, Paul goes on to say that love is the quality so indispensable for holding everything together that the church cannot be considered complete without it.

Like mortar, love may sometimes be, taken for granted, but Paul's words imply that there will be wall failure when it begins to disintegrate. One woman remarked of her church, "I think we have greeters because we're afraid nobody else will speak to us if the greeters don't!" Her somewhat sarcastic comment doesn't reveal why people were not speaking to each other, but it does lead us to ask the question—"Is *this* how we show love?"

A church can be extremely gifted. For example, one member might enjoy the ability of speaking the Gospel in different languages. But Paul says if it is done without love, it is incomprehensible, and the wall is damaged from within. One might possess the gift of speaking on God's behalf as a prophet, or have great knowledge or faith, but if these are employed in a loveless manner, they are inadequate.

Any gift used without love allows the individual bricks to shift and rub against each other. If the bond of love fails, destructive forces can penetrate, and the very bricks in the wall begin to disintegrate.

Paul says churchly love is pragmatic or practical—it is concerned with showing itself in concrete action. Love doesn't just have "the patience of a saint," it is especially patient with other saints. Love isn't content at rest.

It insists on showing itself in kindness to others. Love cheers on the truth; love protects by putting the best construction on everything regarding others;

love always trusts by giving someone the benefit of the doubt; love always anticipates good prevailing over evil; love endures all challenges. Love seems uncomfortable unless it's doing something.

Not only are there practical things for churchly love to do, but there are also pitfalls for it to avoid. Just as good mortar needs to avoid being harder than the bricks that surround it, love must also avoid allowing itself to be envious. Love must never be boastful. Love can have nothing to do with pride. Because its focus is toward others, love cannot be self-seeking. Love can't keep a hit list of people who have somehow wronged it; and love will never align itself with anything evil.

Compare these characteristics of churchly love with the lack of love sometimes evident at church. For example, love is patient and kind, but how many times are people at church impatient and unkind? Are we impatient with the parents of the crying babe or the rambunctious two year old? Do we show love when we criticize the Sunday School teacher rather than offering our help or guidance?

Love is not envious, but people at church can be envious when they do not receive the same recognition as another member of the congregation. *Love* is not boastful or proud, but people in church can act as if they are using their gifts primarily to be recognized by others.

Love is not rude, but church people are extremely rude when they ignore or snub other members.

Love is not self-seeking, but sometimes Christians act as if congregations were there for the express purpose of filling an individual's needs instead of being places to serve the needs of others.

Love is not easily angered, but many Christians become overly sensitive when they do not get their own way. *Love* keeps no record of wrongs, but folks within the congregation begin to keep score after their toes have been stepped on a few times. *Love* takes no delight in evil, but even some of the best

Christians gossip and gloat about the problems and lives of others. Do we show compassion to someone struggling with relationship problems or do we snidely talk behind their backs?

You get the idea. The *love* Paul speaks of is great—it's *people* who are the problem. It can seem like the walls of the church are on the verge of collapsing inward onto themselves.

That's where love comes to the rescue in the form of another person. One Bible scholar suggested that we might substitute the name *Jesus* for *love* in this chapter. *Jesus* is patient, *Jesus* is kind, *Jesus* is not rude—especially when it comes to dealing with people such as ourselves.

For the love of us “unlovables,” He bled and died and rose again to forgive our lovelessness. As we turn to Him in repentance, not only are we forgiven, but also now His love empowers our relationships with others in the body of Christ. We can love others the way Christ has loved us because we have Christ living in us.

His love in us is renewed every time we read about it in the Scriptures, every time we remember our Baptism, and every time we taste it in the Lord's Supper. As we remain in Him, the Master Builder is continually at work tuck-pointing—renewing the strength of the wall by resupplying the mortar that allows the bricks to do their jobs without destroying one another.

That brings about the unfailing, unceasing, enduring kind of love spoken of in the final verses of our text. Paul says God's love will outlast the gifts. Someday when we are in heaven we will reach the point where we need no prophecy, because God will speak to us directly. We all will be filled with the knowledge of God. What we do now is partial and incomplete; what we will experience in heaven will be full and eternal.

Love counts at church. The God who is calling you to show love is the God who offers you the same love in Jesus. His love will supply your need to show love to others.

Amen.

The peace of God, which passes all understanding keep our hearts and minds through Christ Jesus!

Amen.