

1 Corinthians 13:1-13 “It’s All About Context”

When we’re reading the Bible, context is really important. If you read a verse or a passage *out* of context, you can seriously distort its meaning. Or worse, you can “adjust” the meaning of a text by placing it in a *different* context. “So preacher, are you saying that you can make any passage of scripture say what *you want it to say* depending on context?” That’s exactly what I’m saying. See, church can be a dangerous place. Every time we open up this Bible ... every time the worship leader reads the scripture, whoever is reading and interpreting that scripture has the potential to lead you all astray! “So, preacher, is that what you do to us every week?” I sure hope not! That’s why I encourage you all to read your bibles too. Historically the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) are known as “The People of the Book.” So read your book.

Now as a lot of you know, I often turn to the lectionary to help us through the scriptures. I do this because I’d be preaching from Philippians, Mark, and Job every week and every now and then throw in the Book of Micah. The idea behind following this weekly cycle of Bible readings is that after 12 years, a preacher can preach the whole of the Bible to their congregation. On paper, that sounds good, but the reality is that the lectionary doesn’t include some texts. Yes, the lectionary forces me to get out of my comfort zone and deal with John’s gospel, the Book of Hebrews, and Revelation. But when have we ever read from the Song of Solomon? Never! You know why? Because it doesn’t show up in the lectionary! Here’s where it will show up though – three weeks into our Bible study on wisdom literature! That’s plug #1 for Bible Study.

The other problem with the lectionary is the lack of context. Take this week’s text for example. When we read this text, what do we think? “Oh! The love chapter!” And where do we most often hear this passage? At weddings! It is the number one pick on the wedding hit parade! And when we hear it read, Paul’s chapter on love gets morphed

into just another ode to the joys of having your own special someone in your life. “If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have love,” gets heard as “If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have a special person who is the love of my life.” And that is very definitely *not* what this passage is all about. It’s not *opposing* having a special someone, mind you, it’s just not addressing that particular topic. At all.

The context of this texts points us in a very different direction. See, I deliberately started this week’s text with the last verse of chapter 12. When we start there, it draws us back to where Paul was heading in the first place. Now I’m not going to read all of chapter 12 right now because most of you just heard it three weeks ago when we recognized and installed our new leaders. That’s where we learned about how the church is like one body with many members, and how each of the members are given a variety of gifts from the Holy Spirit. What the people in Corinth were doing, however, was saying things like, “Oh, Sister Brenda over here only has the gift of teaching, so she’s not as important as Brother Todd who has the gift of miracles!” Paul said that’s not the way you’re supposed to do church. Okay, then how are we supposed to do it? That’s where we start this week’s lesson – “Let me show you more excellent way!” Are the sounds of wedding bells fading a little?

What Paul is talking about here is unity in the church. Specifically, how does one achieve unity when you have such a wide diversity of spiritual gifts? If you can believe it, the folks in the Corinthian church were getting downright competitive about spiritual gifts. They started ranking each other according to the perceived importance of their spiritual gifts. And when we read what Paul *says* in chapter 12, you can sort of understand *why* they were starting to travel down this path. Paul *did acknowledge* that these Spiritual gifts were different as far as their level of public prominence. You’ve got some gifts that are more for the purpose of *personal* spiritual blessing, but then you have gifts that benefit the entire community. Yes, the *gifts* are different as far as their

importance goes, but that doesn't mean the *people* are more or less important. Because the way the church was interpreting this, was that some people were *indispensable* while others were *expendable*. '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."' So Paul encouraged the Christians to seek out those gifts that are the most valuable for *building up the whole community*. Then he says, "And now, I will show you a much better way" which is where we're starting out this morning. So this whole 13th chapter is about that search for Spiritual gifts.

"If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. 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 do not have love, I am nothing."

Still hearing wedding bells? No? Good! Because what we've got here is Paul reprimanding this group of people who measure their worth by what spiritual gifts they have or don't have. He said that the only measure that matters is in the way you express your love for one another. All those other ways they used to rank their level of importance based on how cool their spiritual gifts were? They don't matter at all. The only measure of who you are in Christ, and how far you have come on the journey into Christ-likeness is the measure of your love.

So how does Paul spell out what this love looks like? He does it in the way that he knows best ... he does it with a vice and virtue list. What's a vice and virtue list? Here's plug number two for Bible study – You'll learn all about vice and virtue lists during week six on Thursday, March 14th in room #6.

Paul spells it all out by saying, "Here's what love is, and here's what love isn't." This is what love looks like and how it behaves. He's not going to let us get away with talking the talk without walking the walk. Love is known by its behavior, not by words or sentiments. To help us

understand a little better, let me express Paul's words in their negatives, so that we might understand them in a new way.

When your treatment of one another is not patient, it is not love. When it is not kind, then it is not love. When you are envious or boastful or arrogant or rude to one another, then you have ceased to love. When you insist on your own way, you are not loving. When you are irritable with one another or resentful of one another, you are not loving. When you take pleasure in wrongs done to another, or in lies told to another, or in any other kind of humiliation or misfortune of another, you cannot claim to have love. And if you do not have love, then you are all noise, and you gain nothing, and any other contribution you make will never compensate for it.

Now I just took a risk here. Remember, I started out this morning saying that it's potentially dangerous to take a passage of scripture and put it in a new context. And what did I just do? But here's the thing - The message can be perceived differently when we see it or hear it alongside something different to its original context. And sometimes that change of context can be valuable. It might enable us to see something we *should have seen in the first place*. It might strip away some of the misunderstandings created by other contexts like, for example, when you hear it at a wedding.

Okay, so let's take a look at how Paul's words look when we put them alongside what Jesus had to say about love: In Mark's gospel, chapter 12, Jesus said that the most important of God's commandments is - "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, and mind." *And* "Love your neighbor as yourself." All of the teachings of the Law and Prophets rest on this foundation. Then when someone asked him, "Oh yeah? Well then who is my neighbor?" he launched into the story about the Good Samaritan which is all about focusing on our love for the "outsider." This is another one of those, "Who does he think he is" moments that Georgeanne was talking about last week.

This is the kind of love that our faith demands of us. Demands? Yes. Demands. This is the kind of love that Jesus calls us to practice in order for us to be all that we were meant and called to be as his followers. But it's also the kind of love that is *promised* to us and *lavished* on us. Because even if we totally refuse to love ... even if we choose to behave like the most bitter enemies of God and everyone else, God still loves us with patience, kindness, humility, endurance and hope, and reaches out to us through Jesus, offering himself to us and for us and doing whatever it takes to love us back into relationship with God. That means it is possible for all of us to become people of Christ-like love, because Christ's love for us will never give up until that happens, no matter how long it takes. Love is always an action, not just a sentiment or theory. Love is as love does, or it is nothing.