

THE MOST EXCELLENT WAY

1 CORINTHIANS 13:1-13

LETHBRIDGE MENNONITE CHURCH

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On Thursday night, we had our annual church business meeting. Perhaps these annual meetings aren't high on many people's list of "ways to spend an evening (although our turnout was pretty good!), but I think they provide a good opportunity to look back, to look ahead, to kind of "take stock."

They're good for saying, how have we been doing and what ought we to do?

They're good opportunities to revisit some of the things we've been doing regularly for a very long time and say, "Why do we do this? Is this still who we are? Does this still reflect our values as a church? Is this still what we feel God is calling us to?"

It's important to ask these questions in the life of our church. I once read an article in a church magazine about a new pastor who came to a church and was puzzled about why they had a certain regular event that few people came to.

He said, "This sounds like the kind of thing that has a history but not a reason."

This isn't a bad framework through which to think about many things. It's good to ask in the life of the church.

It's also good to ask about our lives and our faith more generally.

Why bother with **church** in a culture where church is not a very fashionable or convenient thing to bother with?

Why bother with **faith** in a culture where “what you see is what you get” seems to be the prevailing norm?

Why bother with **God** in a culture that seems either to have left God behind or, more frequently, refashioned God into an image of ourselves and our own preferences?

Why do we hang on to these things? Are we people who do the things we do and believe the things we do and pursue the things that we do because they have a *history* or because they have a *reason*?

I can't speak for others, but I think that each one of us, in our own way, and whether we can articulate it or not, and has *some* sense that all of this church and faith and God business has something to do with the conviction that to be a human being is to be called to something.

It is to be invited to *become* something.

There is something fundamentally different about human beings, something that sets us apart from everything else in creation. We alone have been given the fearful and holy task of *choosing* what we will be. Or, what we will not be.

It is *possible* to unreflectively make our way through life kind of taking the path of least resistance and following a kind of, “if it feels good, do it” approach. Many people do this.

But I think all of us know that we were made for more than this. All of us know that there are better and worse ways of being human.

And those of us who make our way to worship each week, those of us who are part of Christian communities, believe that the most excellent way to be human is somehow bound up with the way of Jesus of Nazareth.

We don't always think of things in the same way. “Jesus is the answer” is not always the response to the same questions.

But I think *most* of us would say that our participation in this thing called church, our commitment to these things called faith and discipleship are connected to a desire to do

what God wants, to be who God wants us to be, to experience the fullness of life that God offers.

So how do we pursue this “becoming what God wants us to be?”

I am currently about half way through my fortieth year on this planet. I’ve been a Christian for nearly all of those forty years—as many as I can remember, at any rate.

According to Canadian life-expectancy standards, I’m roughly halfway through this journey of life and it’s natural to kind of take stock and ask questions like, “What have I learned, thus far?”

Well, I’ve observed that there are many ways of pursuing this “becoming what God wants us to be” business. I’ve noticed that for many, faith tends to morph into a wide variety of “isms”:

Activism — We try to ensure that we are involved in enough of the right causes in the service of justice and peace work

Asceticism — We try to achieve heroic feats of self-denial and discipline in an attempt to demonstrate our commitment and our seriousness to God

Pietism/Moralism – We try to do enough right things and avoid enough wrong things and generally impress God with our personal holiness and purity.

Intellectualism — We try to become answer people. We strive for cognitive certainty and theological precision, and the suppression of all doubts.

I’ve spent time in each one of these “isms.” And I’ve found each of them unsatisfying in and of themselves. I’ve found that each one can lead to feelings of weariness and emptiness.

Each one has left me longing simultaneously for more and for less. For something deeper and truer, yet also simpler.

I’ve read enough to know that I’m not alone in feeling this way.

I recently read an interview with J.I. Packer, prominent evangelical theologian and the esteemed author of *Knowing God*. Packer is now nearing the end of his ninth decade on the planet, so if anyone would have some insight into some of these big questions it would be him, right?

Listen to what Packer says, as he reflects on his earthly journey drawing to a close:

I have lived long enough, by the way, to realize that usefulness is much more profoundly a matter of the kind of person you are than of the particular things you do.

When you are young, you tend to think of usefulness entirely as the things you do. All through the years, however, steadily God has been reminding me that what I am is fundamental to what I do, and is really much more important than what I do.

That's the perspective that I live with and relax with, and I try on a day-to-day basis to ensure that I am what I claim to be, what I need to be. That is a concern which I find keeps me God-centred and Christ-centred in my concerns in living rather than self-centred.¹

And then, Packer offered this analysis of the present state of the church:

When I go around to churches, I get the strong feeling that we aren't taking love as our primary calling as seriously as we should—which I now diagnose as immaturity rather than perversity.

In our churches we are juvenile in many ways at points where we ought to be adult. We're the victims actually of the world's conviction that your significance depends entirely on what you do and not at all on who you are... And if you hold to that idea that what you do is what counts, it does keep you juvenile. It keeps you from real spiritual development at a deep level.²

¹ Karen Stiller, "Being Made Strong on the Strength of the Lord," in *Faith Today*, January/February, 2014

² Ibid.

This is how one of the greatest evangelical theologians of the twentieth century diagnoses our present moment in the church.

He doesn't talk about our methods of evangelism or the inadequacy of our social engagement. He doesn't talk about church growth strategies or marketing campaigns. He doesn't talk about the challenges of pluralism and how the church ought to respond to being one minority voice among countless others.

He doesn't do any of these things.

He says that the church isn't taking love as its primary calling as seriously as we should.

1 Corinthians 13 is all about love.

For Paul, love is the "more excellent way" to be a human being. Love is what the church is all about.

It's a real shame that this marvelous passage is so frequently filtered through our cultural lenses of individualism and romanticism, and these ground-shaking words about the very nature of reality are reduced to flowery ornamentation on wedding programs.



As we know, Paul is not writing to star-crossed lovers looking for some inspiration for their special day.

He is writing to a **church**—and a church that couldn't stop fighting and disagreeing with one another, a church where members took advantage of one another, where the poor were marginalized and mistreated, a church where spiritual gifts were being sought for the wrong reasons, a church where people were getting drunk at communion—a church that was hardly a model of virtue and maturity.

To these people, Paul says, "I will show you the most excellent way." And that way is love.

1 Corinthians 13 is perhaps one of the most beautiful passages in all of Scripture—but it is a profoundly sobering passage. At least it should be, if we're paying attention.

If we do not love, Paul says, we have nothing. We gain nothing. We make a bit of noise for a brief moment of time, and then we exit the stage.

- All the knowledge in the world—all the carefully formulated doctrines and creeds of the church, all of the well-articulated theologies, all of the stimulating intellectual conversations... *nothing without love*
- The most brilliant charismatic style and ability to communicate... *nothing without love*
- All the social action and worthy causes we get behind... *nothing without love*
- All of the self-discipline we are able to work up... *nothing without love*
- All the money we can make and the prestige we can acquire.... *nothing without love*
- All the faith we can muster... *nothing without love.*
- All the “isms” we are so naturally drawn to... *nothing without love.*

Not “less effective,” not “could use a bit of improvement,” not a decent start or a step in the right direction.” *Nothing.* Without love.

Everything we attach significance and worth to, everything we cling to for security and identity will pass away... *but love never fails.*

Love is the “most excellent way.” And it is not an optional component of the Christian life. It is not a nice ideal we should aspire to, or something we should at least say we admire.

It’s not something we should really get around to some day. It’s not something for the “super-Christians.”

Love is who we are as followers of Jesus. Love is what life in the kingdom of God looks like.

So, if we take J.I. Packer seriously, if we take the Apostle Paul seriously that our goal ought to be to move beyond adolescent spirituality represented by all the “isms” we are drawn to, the question becomes: What exactly does an adult Christian life look like? What does love look like?

It looks like patience.

It looks like kindness.

It looks like a refusal to be arrogant or boastful or envious or rude.

It looks like deferring to others, not insisting on our own way.

It looks like not being irritable or resentful.

It looks like rejoicing in what is true instead of what is false.

It looks like trusting, protecting, hoping, and persevering.

Each of us, every day and in all kinds of ways, are presented with opportunities to choose each of these expressions. Or not. In our relationships, in our families, in our workplace, online, in our church, in our community—each of us, each day, can choose love. Or not.

I don't know about you, but when I imagine a human life that looks like this, I think... Excellent.

When I think about a *church* that looks like this, I think... Excellent.

There's one more thing love looks like. It looks like eternity.

Verse 8 says, "Love never ends."

What an incredible statement. *Love never ends.*

Faith will one day become sight, and hope will end in fulfillment.

But love will still remain.

Why?

Because God *is* love. Because other-oriented, sacrificial love is who God is. Because if love had an end, then God would have an end.

I am convinced that the most significant move we can ever make in life is the journey from fear to love.

There is no more foundational trajectory that we can ever embark upon. And there is probably no more difficult one.

So many expressions of faith are rooted in fear rather than in love. This is not surprising, because there are many things that quite naturally call forth our fears:

- The economy
- The violence that fills our newspapers
The “other” — people who are different, people we see as threats
- Employment worries
- Fears for our kids and their futures
- Judgment
- that we can’t or won’t be forgiven
- Aging
- Death

And in the face of all these things that occasion our fears (and countless others!), we as Christians are to be those who respond with love.

We are invited into a life that is free from fear because we know that fear is in the process of being swallowed up and defeated by love, and will one day finally be a thing of the past and remembered no more.

We know this is true because of what God accomplished in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus.

Because when love came to earth, it looked like God in flesh, laying down his life in love to reconcile all things to himself.

Love is *who we are* because love is *who God is*.

1 Corinthians 13 is not a bit of sentimental poetry for the kind hearted and naïve.

It is not a passage that preachers like to go on and on about because it sounds so much nicer than the harder passages of Scripture.

It does not describe the softer side of God that we must be very careful to then “balance out” with the harsher, nastier side of God.

There is nothing truer that we will ever say about God than love. There is nothing truer that we will ever say about the purpose of the church than love. There is nothing truer that we will every say about the meaning of a human life than love.

Love is the reason for it all.

And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love.

It is the most excellent way. It is what we were made for. It is what we need. It is what the world needs.

So, may God help us to grow up. As a church and as individuals. May God help us to put the ways of childhood behind us, and pursue this most excellent way.

Amen.

