

Over the past two weeks we've considered the purpose and the administration of the spiritual gifts. We've learned the purpose of the gifts is for God's children to glorify the name of Jesus. And we learned the administration of the gifts is as seamless as the members of the human body all joined together performing a single function. But there are priorities as regards the use of our spiritual gifts for the fulfillment of our mission. That's what we're going to talk about this morning, our priorities, and how this might shape our walk with God and with one another.

OPENING PRAYER

1st CORINTHIANS 12:31b-13:13: 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,^[a] but have not love, I gain nothing.⁴ Love is patient and kind; love does not envy or boast; it is not arrogant⁵ or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful;^[b]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.

The first part of what St. Paul wrote lays down the foundation for how we will prioritize our work as the Body of Christ. He wrote, **1st Corinthians 12:31b-13:3,** 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.

Love is the foundation of the work of Christ's church. Paul's saying that everything we do is shaped by love, or at least it should be. In other words, our work in the church should be preceded with the question, "Why am I doing what I'm doing?" And our answer should be, "Because I love God and I love his people."

Paul saw that something else was going on in the church, however. Thus he identified some of the spiritual gifts and then he said even if I have this or that gift but I'm not loving, then what I'm doing means nothing.

Apparently, there was a lot of pride in the church, people claimed they had been endowed with certain spiritual gifts and boasted about it. But because they were not loving in the way they used their gifts, they failed to advance the work of God one iota. In other words, their spiritual gifts became something less than spiritual.

Paul continued, writing, **1st Corinthians 13:4-7, Love is patient and kind; love does not envy or boast; it is not arrogant⁵ 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.**

Paul contrasted love with the abuse of spiritual gifts and then he defined what love is by describing what it is and what it is not. We've probably participated in a philosophical discussion a time or two trying to define love, as though it was some great mystery. But here we see that it's not that hard to understand.

Paul wrote that "**Love is patient and kind.**" And then he told us what patience and kindness are not, that is, it is not envy, boasting, arrogance, rudeness, pushiness, irritability, resentfulness, and spite.

It's interesting how the media glorifies everything that is not loving. Characters in movies who are arrogant, vindictive, and mean-tempered are the norm.

I enjoy a good action-packed drama just like anyone else, but the Christian-way of life—our way of thinking and our way of living—is obviously counter-cultural to everything we’re being fed by the world around us.

I propose that we grow in our understanding of what love is by memorizing these four verses, and pray through them every morning. The Holy Spirit will then remind us throughout our day when we fail to love, and he will encourage us to try again.

Please repeat after me: ***1st Corinthians 13:4-7***

**Love is patient and kind;
love does not envy or boast;
it is not arrogant⁵ 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.**

Paul wrote, **1st Corinthians 13:8-10, 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.

Love is the one thing on which the work of the church stands or falls in the eyes of the world. Which is to say, when people who are not Christians complain about Christians it is not because we were too gentle, too tenderhearted, or too self-sacrificing! In fact, when adults convert from another religion to Christianity it’s usually because the Christian they met was overflowing with love, they made a sacrifice for them, they went the extra mile, they were extraordinarily kind, gentle, and generous with them. We hear accounts like these, and they always sound like miracles to us. But they shouldn’t.

Alas, Christians can be just as vindictive, narrow-minded, pushy, angry, sullen, deceitful, lustful, greedy, and proud as people who don’t know Jesus!

Love, true love, everlasting love, pure love began for you and me on the Cross of Christ. There Jesus poured his love down upon us when he said, “**Father, forgive them for they do not know what they are doing.**” There on the Cross Jesus showered us with his love when he absorbed into his flesh the pain we deserved for our sin against the one Holy God. There on the Cross, Jesus poured down upon us his love when he died for our sins.

Jesus’ love for us never ends. He enveloped us in his love despite ourselves. This is what sustains us. This is what gives us life. This is what makes us whole. This love is what makes our lives worth living. This love is the love we have in our hearts to share with those around us.

Paul wrote, **1st Corinthians 13:11-12, 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.**

My friends, you are “**fully known,**” by God. That’s why Jesus died for you. He knows you. He knows you from the top of your head to the bottom of your feet. He knows you. And he loves you. He likes you too. Even though we have a hard time accepting who and what we are, Jesus receives you and me with no strings attached. And we belong to him, forever.

This is a big part of our journey with God: Believing in our heart of hearts that God really does love us. And when we take hold of that love, when we are comforted by that love, when we can say this love God has for me is real, then we can begin walking with one another in love.

Paul wrote, **1st Corinthians 13:13, So now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; but the greatest of these is love.**

Friends in Christ, God is so full of love that he gave us his Son Jesus so that he could embrace us as his children forever. He has poured into our hearts his love through his Spirit, and with that love we are filled with a confidence and courage to live day by day in this love. It is with this love that we can care for one another just as God has cared for us, lifting one another up, encouraging one another, serving one another, making sacrifices for each other. The Lord gave himself to us,

and we give ourselves to one another as a reflection of this gift, as a token of our thankfulness to him.

Perhaps you've seen the movie, Friday Night Lights. It's a true story about a West Texas, small town high school football team that discovers its greatest strength is not in its physical prowess but in its heart. Billy Bob Thornton plays their coach. His battle cry throughout the movie is, "Be perfect!"

Near the end of the movie it's half time for the season championship game, and the small town team is being beaten by a big city team of giants. Billy Bob Thornton gives a speech to the boys in the locker room about how they're going to play the second half. He says,

Now most of you have been playin' this game for ten years. And you got two more quarters and after that most of you will never play this game again as long as you live. Now, ya'll have known me for awhile, and for a long time now you've been hearin' me talk about being perfect.

Well I want you to understand somethin'. To me, being perfect is not about that scoreboard out there. It's not about winning. It's about you and your relationship to yourself and your family and your friends.

Being perfect is about being able to look your friends in the eye and know that you didn't let them down, because you told them the truth. And that truth is that you did everything that you could. There wasn't one more thing that you could've done.

Can you live in that moment, as best you can, with clear eyes and love in your heart? With joy in your heart? If you can do that gentlemen, then you're perfect.

I want you to take a moment. And I want you to look each other in the eyes. I want you to put each other in your hearts forever, because forever's about to happen here in just a few minutes.

Friends in Christ, this is it. What we do here at Faith Lutheran Church is the real thing; it's the only thing; it's the only thing that matters between now and forever.

I want us to be perfect. I want each one of us to be able to look each other in the eye and be able to say, I didn't let you down; I always told you the truth.

I want each of one of us to hold one another in our heart, forever, because, my friends, forever is happening right now.

Now take a moment to look to your left and to your right. Look into each other's eyes, and put your brother and sister here, in your heart. Now think about how Jesus loves them and how he died for them. Now think about the people in your life: your family members, especially those you have trouble with; your coworkers, especially those with whom you struggle; think about the people you meet in the grocery store, in the mall, wherever you go; think about all those people whom you may tuck into your heart.

And think about the children, all the children in our preschool and school, and put them in your hearts too, and their families, and the children and families in our neighborhood who can and should be in our schools. And love them.

Brothers and sisters in Christ, this week let us remember what love is, that it is “patient and kind,” that it “is not irritable and resentful.” This is the number one priority for our work here at Faith and how we use the spiritual gifts God has given us.

This week let us find ways to show the world what the love of Jesus really looks like.

And this week let us share this Good News with another person who really needs to hear it, in the name of Jesus. Amen.