

“THE MORE EXCELLENT WAY”

(Before scripture)

I CONSIDERED HANGING ONTO OUR LECTIONARY EPISTLE READING FOR TODAY.

I THOUGHT WE MIGHT DO WELL TO USE IT ON VALENTINE’S DAY, ESPECIALLY SINCE THIS IS THE ONE YEAR IN EVERY SEVEN THAT VALENTINE’S DAY ACTUALLY FALLS ON A SUNDAY.

IF WE HADN’T USED THE PREVIOUS READINGS IN I CORINTHIANS FOR THE PAST TWO WEEKS, THAT’S PRECISELY WHAT I WOULD HAVE DONE.

BUT HAVING LOOKED AT PORTIONS OF THE 12TH CHAPTER OF FIRST CORINTHIANS FOR TWO SUNDAYS NOW, IT WOULD SEEM A SHAME NOT TO CONTINUE TO LISTEN TO WHAT PAUL IS SAYING – ESPECIALLY SINCE WE CONCLUDED LAST WEEK WITH THOSE INTRIGUING WORDS: “AND I WILL SHOW YOU A STILL MORE EXCELLENT WAY.”

I DIDN’T WANT TO LET THOSE WORDS JUST HANG THERE, FEELING LIKE A TEASER FOR THE NEXT EPISODE IN A T.V. DRAMA – “NEXT WEEK ON PAUL & THE CORINTHIANS.”

YOU’RE ALL PREPARED TO FIND OUT WHAT COMES NEXT & HOW IT WILL ALL PLAY OUT, ONLY TO DISCOVER THAT THE SHOW HAS BEEN PRE-EMPTED & YOU’RE LEFT IN SUSPENSE FOR TWO MORE WEEKS!

THAT’S ONE REASON I CHOSE NOT TO DELAY USING IT UNTIL VALENTINE’S DAY.

ANOTHER REASON, THOUGH, IS BECAUSE THIS PASSAGE – IN ITS ORIGINAL CONTEXT – IS QUITE DIFFERENT FROM HOW WE HAVE TRADITIONALLY COME TO UNDERSTAND IT.

REMEMBER THE SITUATION THAT EXISTED IN CORINTH.

PAUL HAD ESTABLISHED THE CHURCH THERE & HE REMAINED WITH THEM FOR AS LONG AS A YEAR & A HALF.

HE MOVED ON TO OTHER PLACES BUT RECEIVED WORD – THROUGH A LETTER – THAT THINGS WEREN’T GOING WELL.

EUGENE PETERSON, IN HIS INTRODUCTION TO FIRST CORINTHIANS IN THE MESSAGE, BEGINS BY SAYING, “WHEN PEOPLE BECOME CHRISTIANS, THEY DON’T AT THE SAME MOMENT BECOME NICE.”

THE PEOPLE OF CORINTH HAD A LONG REPUTATION AS AN UNRULY, HARD-DRINKING, SEXUALLY PROMISCUOUS BUNCH.

WHEN PAUL ESTABLISHED THE CHURCH THERE, MANY OF THEM BROUGHT THEIR REPUTATIONS RIGHT INTO THE CHURCH.

THEY HAD MADE PROGRESS BUT WERE NOW SEEMINGLY DRIFTING BACK INTO THEIR OLD WAYS.

THERE WERE DIVISIONS & CONFLICTS & ALL SORTS OF SQUABBLES TAKING PLACE.

THROUGHOUT THE 12TH CHAPTER, PAUL TRIED TO CONVINCING THEM THAT THE WAY THEY WERE ACTING WAS NOT THE WAY OF CHRIST.

HE ENDS THAT SECTION WITH THOSE CAPTIVATING WORDS: “AND I WILL SHOW YOU A STILL MORE EXCELLENT WAY.”

LET’S READ ABOUT THAT “MORE EXCELLENT WAY.”

I CORINTHIANS 13.

(After scripture)

THIS IS PERHAPS ONE OF THE MOST RECOGNIZABLE PASSAGES IN THE ENTIRE BIBLE – “THE LOVE CHAPTER” AS IT HAS COME TO BE KNOWN.

EVEN OUTSIDE THE CHURCH, THE WORDS FOUND HERE ARE QUITE OFTEN FAMILIAR AS THEY HAVE BEEN QUOTED BY ALL SORTS OF WRITERS AND SPEAKERS AND EVEN FILM-MAKERS SEEKING TO USE THESE TRULY IMMORTAL WORDS FOR THEIR OWN PARTICULAR AGENDAS.

IN THE MOVIE “THE WEDDING CRASHERS,” AS THE BRIDE’S SISTER IS INVITED TO THE LECTERN TO READ A PASSAGE OF SCRIPTURE, OWEN WILSON’S CHARACTER SAYS, “20 BUCKS. I CORINTHIANS.”

VINCE VAUGHN’S CHARACTER RESPONDS WITH “DOUBLE OR NOTHING – COLOSSIANS 3:12.”

AND THE BRIDE’S SISTER SAYS, “AND NOW A READING FROM PAUL’S FIRST LETTER TO THE CORINTHIANS...”

THERE IS INDEED A UNIVERSAL ASPECT TO THESE WORDS.

THE THINGS THAT PAUL SAYS HERE ABOUT LOVE ARE PROFOUND AND HAVE AN APPEAL BEYOND THEIR IMMEDIATE CONTEXT.

NEVERTHELESS, THERE IS A DEPTH OF MEANING TO THEM THAT CAN BE MISSED WHEN WE FORGET THAT THESE WORDS ARE PART OF A LETTER AND THAT THEY COME *AFTER* CERTAIN THINGS HAVE ALREADY BEEN SAID BY PAUL.

WHILE IT’S LOGICAL FOR US TO HEAR THESE WORDS READ IN THE CONTEXT OF SOMETHING LIKE A WEDDING CEREMONY, THAT WAS NOT THE WAY THEY WERE FIRST RECEIVED.

IT’S BEEN POINTED OUT THAT WHEN THESE WORDS WERE FIRST READ TO THE CHURCH IN CORINTH, IT IS HIGHLY UNLIKELY THAT AN ENGAGED COUPLE LISTENING TO THEM WOULD HAVE BEEN LEANING OVER WHISPERING AMONGST THEMSELVES ABOUT HOW THIS WOULD BE A GREAT THING FOR SOMEONE TO READ IN THEIR UPCOMING WEDDING CEREMONY!

AND THE REASON THEY WOULDN’T HAVE BEEN SAYING THAT IS BECAUSE WHEN YOU READ 1ST CORINTHIANS 13, *AFTER* READING CHAPTER 12, YOU REALIZE THAT THE INTENT OF THESE WORDS - THE *PURPOSE* OF THIS ENTIRE CHAPTER - WAS ACTUALLY TO SERVE AS A MILD *REBUKE* OF THE CORINTHIAN CONGREGATION AS WELL AS A CHALLENGE TO LOVE.

THE EFFECT WOULD HAVE BEEN SOMETHING LIKE WHAT HAPPENED TO JULIE ANDREWS IN THE MOVIE, *THE SOUND OF MUSIC*, WHEN SHE WAS FIRST INTRODUCED TO THE VON TRAPP CHILDREN.

THEY TREATED HER HORRIBLY & EVEN PUT A FROG IN HER POCKET.

BUT AT THE DINNER TABLE, MARIA DELIVERS A SHORT SPEECH IN WHICH SHE TALKS ABOUT HOW KIND EVERYONE HAS BEEN, AND HOW WARMLY SHE HAS BEEN WELCOMED AND HOW MUCH AT HOME SHE HAS BEEN MADE TO FEEL.

SHE SAYS, “*KNOWING HOW NERVOUS I MUST HAVE BEEN. . . A STRANGER IN A NEW HOUSEHOLD.KNOWING HOW IMPORTANT IT WAS FOR ME TO FEEL ACCEPTED.IT WAS SO KIND AND THOUGHTFUL OF YOU TO MAKE MY FIRST MOMENTS HERE. . . SO WARM AND HAPPY. . .AND PLEASANT.*”

AND AS SHE GOES ON WITH THESE LOVELY, KIND WORDS, THE CHILDREN BEGIN FEELING MORE AND MORE MISERABLE FOR ALL THE THINGS THEY HAD DONE AND REALIZED, OF COURSE, THAT MARIA’S WORDS DIDN’T REALLY APPLY TO THEM AT ALL.

IN THE END, THEY ALL END UP CRYING AND LEAVING THE TABLE.

IT’S A GREAT SCENE.

WELL, THE READING OF THESE WORDS OF PAUL WOULD HAVE HAD THE SAME EFFECT ON THOSE IN THE CORINTHIAN CONGREGATION.

NOW I DON’T KNOW IF ANYONE RAN OFF CRYING, BUT I THINK - AT THE VERY LEAST - THEY WOULD HAVE FELT SOMEWHAT CHASTENED BY PAUL’S WORDS - AS WELL THEY SHOULD HAVE BEEN, FOR THAT WAS PAUL’S INTENTION.

I THINK IT’S INTERESTING THAT PAUL USES THE PRONOUN “*I*” THROUGHOUT THIS CHAPTER WHEN HE REALLY MEANS “*YOU*.”

HE TURNS THE ATTENTION TO HIMSELF TO SHOW HOW TOTALLY IMPROPER THEIR BEHAVIOR HAS BEEN. IT WOULDN’T HAVE TAKEN MUCH FOR THE CORINTHIANS TO SWITCH THE PRONOUN IN THESE WORDS. REMEMBER THE THINGS PAUL WAS SPEAKING AGAINST IN THE PREVIOUS CHAPTER – IT WAS THE VERY THINGS HE ADDRESSES HERE.

WHAT HE’S REALLY SAYING IS – “*IF YOU SPEAK IN THE TONGUES OF MORTALS & ANGELS, BUT HAVE NOT LOVE – YOU ARE A NOISY GONG OR A CLANGING CYMBAL.*

IF YOU HAVE PROPHETIC POWERS & IF YOU UNDERSTAND ALL MYSTERIES & ALL KNOWLEDGE, AND IF YOU HAVE ALL FAITH, SO AS TO REMOVE MOUNTAINS, BUT DON’T HAVE LOVE, YOU ARE NOTHING.

IF YOU GIVE AWAY ALL YOUR POSSESSIONS, AND IF YOU HAND OVER YOUR BODY SO THAT YOU MAY BOAST ABOUT IT, BUT DON’T HAVE LOVE, YOU GAIN NOTHING.”

YOU SEE – PAUL SAW A FRACTURED CHURCH IN A FRACTURED COMMUNITY IN A FRACTURED WORLD. THERE WAS BROKENNESS ALL AROUND.

COULD THEY BE HEALED OF THEIR BROKENNESS?

COULD THEY SURVIVE?

IT’S AN AGE-OLD QUESTION.

IT’S A QUESTION FOR OUR DAY AS WELL.

CAN WE SURVIVE ECONOMIC TURMOIL?

CAN WE SURVIVE POLITICAL, SOCIAL, THEOLOGICAL CHAOS?

CAN WE SURVIVE DIFFERENCE OF OPINION AT VIRTUALLY EVERY LEVEL OF SOCIETY?

AFTER HIS ENORMOUS CHALLENGE TO THE PEOPLE OF CORINTH THAT BEGAN IN THE 12TH CHAPTER OF THIS LETTER, PAUL SOARED TO HEIGHTS OF LITERARY & THEOLOGICAL BEAUTY RARELY – IF EVER – ACHIEVED BEFORE OR SINCE.

“IF I SPEAK IN THE TONGUES OF MEN & ANGELS, BUT HAVE NOT LOVE...”

THOSE WORDS WOULD BECOME THE GLUE THAT WOULD MOLD & HOLD THE MEMBERS OF THAT CONGREGATION INTO A FELLOWSHIP SO STRONG THAT NOTHING COULD BREAK ITS POWER.

HIS ANTIDOTE FOR A TROUBLED TIME & A TROUBLED CHURCH & A TROUBLED WORLD WAS THE GIFT CALLED LOVE.

IT IS *“THE MORE EXCELLENT WAY.”*

IT IS THE MOST EXCELLENT WAY THE WORLD HAS EVER KNOWN .

HE GAVE THE CONGREGATION A VISION OF CARING THAT WOULD KEEP THEM TOGETHER & MEND THEIR DIFFERENCES – A DREAM THAT WOULD SEND THEM OUT INTO THE WORLD AS PEOPLE WHO WERE DIFFERENT – PEOPLE WHO WERE PREPARED FOR WHATEVER CHALLENGES WOULD COME THEIR WAY.

THE CHALLENGE TO CORINTH IS A CHALLENGE TO THE CHURCH IN OUR OWN TIME.

IT’S A CHALLENGE TO SET OUR HEARTS ON A VISION SO GREAT THAT NOTHING – ABSOLUTELY NOTHING – CAN STOP ITS POWER.

THESE ARE NOT NAMBY-PAMBY, SUGARY SWEET SENTAMENTALITIES PAUL IS SPOUTING HERE.

THESE AREN’T WORDS FOR LITTLE CHILDREN.

JUST LOOK AT THE LAST SECTION OF THE CHAPTER – *“WHEN I WAS A CHILD, I SPOKE LIKE A CHILD, I THOUGHT LIKE A CHILD, I REASONED LIKE A CHILD. WHEN I BECAME AN ADULT, I GAVE UP CHILDISH WAYS...”*

THESE WORDS ARE POWERFUL WORDS – THEY’RE STRONG WORDS.

THEY’RE WORDS THAT REQUIRE A HIGH LEVEL OF SPIRITUAL, EMOTIONAL & PHYSICAL MATURITY TO PUT INTO PRACTICE.

ONE OF THE MOST FASCINATING ASPECTS OF PAUL’S DESCRIPTION OF LOVE IN THIS PASSAGE IS THAT IT’S HEAVY ON VERBS.

NOUNS ARE A DIME A DOZEN IN OUR FAITH.

NOUNS COME EASY TO US.

GOD, FATHER, JESUS, HOLY SPIRIT, CHURCH, CROSS, RESURRECTION, BIBLE, TEN COMMANDMENTS.

OUR FAITH IS FILLED WITH NOUNS THAT ROLL OFF OUR TONGUES FAR TOO CASUALLY.

EVEN ADJECTIVES ARE SIMPLE FOR US IN OUR FAITH.

WONDERFUL, GREAT, SWEET, ALMIGHTY, HOLY.

YES, ADJECTIVES IN CHRISTIANITY ARE AS SIMPLE TO COME BY AS NOUNS.

IT'S THE VERBS THAT TRIP US UP.

BUT IT'S THE VERBS THAT MAKE THINGS HAPPEN.

IT'S THE VERBS THAT MAKE OUR FAITH COME TO LIFE.

ONE OF THE MOST AMAZING THINGS ABOUT PAUL'S LOVE CHAPTER – THE THING THAT MAKES “*THE MORE EXCELLENT WAY*” EXCELLENT – IS THAT HE MAKES IT CLEAR THAT LOVE IS A VERB.

LOVE IS USED AS A NOUN ONLY THREE TIMES IN THIS ENTIRE CHAPTER BUT THERE ARE 15 VERBS THAT ARE USED TO DESCRIBE LOVE.

IN WRITING TO THE CORINTHIAN CHRISTIANS & IN WRITING TO US, PAUL SAYS, “*YOU DON'T NEED ANY MORE NOUNS OR ADJECTIVES. WHAT YOU NEED ARE SOME ACTION WORDS TO BUILD BRIDGES ACROSS THE CHASMS THAT DIVIDE YOU FROM ONE ANOTHER & FROM THE WORLD.*”

I KNOW THAT IT'S OBLIGATORY TO COME BACK FROM A VISIT TO OUR GRANDSON WITH AT LEAST ONE ILLUSTRATION.

I'VE GOT ONE FOR YOU, BUT IT DOESN'T REALLY HAVE ANYTHING TO DO WITH DYLAN.

WHILE PERUSING OUR SON DEREK'S BOOKS ONE DAY THIS PAST WEEK, I NOTICED ONE OF THOSE FUN LITTLE MAGNET GAMES SITTING ON THE BOOKSHELF.

THERE WERE ABOUT 25 LITTLE HARDWARE NUTS SITTING ON A DISK THAT HAD A MAGNET UNDERNEATH ITS CENTER.

WHEN THE NUTS WERE PILED ON TOP OF ONE ANOTHER, THEY'D STAY TOGETHER & YOU COULD MOVE THEM AROUND ON THE MAGNET.

THEY'D COME TOGETHER IN A FASCINATING PATTERN OF UNITY.

BUT WITHOUT THE MAGNET THE PATTERN FALLS APART & EACH NUT GOES ITS OWN SEPARATE WAY.

THE APOSTLE PAUL, IN WRITING TO A SPLINTERED, FRACTURED CONGREGATION IN CORINTH, REMEMBERED HIS DAYS BEFORE HIS DAMASCUS ROAD EXPERIENCE.

HE REMEMBERED THAT THE GREAT MAGNET HAD REACHED DOWN INTO THE BROKEN, CLUTTERED PIECES OF HIS LIFE & FORMED A WHOLENESS.

YEARS LATER HE WROTE TO HIS SPLINTERED & FRACTURED FRIENDS IN THAT SPLINTERED & FRACTURED CONGREGATION IN A SPLINTERED & FRACTURED WORLD.

“I WILL SHOW YOU A MORE EXCELLENT WAY.”

PAUL KNEW THAT WHAT HAD HAPPENED TO HIM COULD HAPPEN TO THE CHURCH & TO THE WHOLE WORLD.

WHEN WE SET OUR HEARTS & OUR MINDS ON A GROWN-UP LOVE – A LOVE THAT MANIFESTS ITSELF & COMES TO LIFE IN VERBS - A LOVE THAT CARES & GIVES & RISKS & SACRIFICES, IT IS THEN & ONLY THEN THAT A GREAT CHANGE CAN TAKE PLACE.

FORGIVE ME, BUT LIKE THAT LITTLE GAME OF DEREK'S, WHEN ALL OF US “NUTS” COME TOGETHER, THE GREAT MAGNET OF LOVE CAN DO EXTRAORDINARY THINGS.

*The Reverend Dr. Dennis R. Davenport
Eastminster Presbyterian Church
Evansville, Indiana*