

MORE THAN MEDIOCRE - LOVE
A SERMON BASED ON 1 CORINTHIANS 13
PREACHED AT CHIPPAWA PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH
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SUNDAY, FEBRUARY 10, 2019
10:00 a.m.

Our current sermon series is titled 'More Than Mediocre'.

It is the theme we have pulled from the apostle Paul's letter to the church
in the ancient city of Corinth.

The Corinthian congregation was a church

with struggles that make this congregation look like
the place where angels landed,

the good angels.

In fact things were so off track

the Corinthians needed two letters, long letters

1 and 2 Corinthians are two longer letters to help the church,

both the Corinthian congregation of 2000 years ago,

and in a surprising relevant way,

to the church of today.

These are letters intended to bring the church

to a place

of greater maturity in faith
greater knowledge of Jesus,
better practice in areas
of morality and generosity and worship
and with just general coaching
on what the life of a follower of Jesus
can actually look like.

It can be so much more than just a no cost, value add, lifestyle label.

so much more than just effortless coasting on a belief system.

Paul provokes the church to progress.

To grow so that with intention, and effort and spirit,

we can be so much more than a church goer,

so much more than nominal or occasional,

so much more than mediocre.

These are letters with coaching and direction that can help us grow

to be the fullest and best embodiment of a Jesus follower,

to be the closest to the character of Jesus

we can be.

As we have moved through 1 Corinthians,
we have looked at the place of Jesus,
the role of unity with other believers,
how to position and understand morality in the life of faith,
as well as the posture we should take at worship,
and then today,
with this passage you hear at almost every wedding,
a passage you hear so much it is in danger of becoming cliché,
today,

Paul unveils a four letter word
that can be both a land mine
blowing the wheels off a smoothly running life,
and but also empty shell holding nothing of power.
Love.

After all he has taught so far in this letter;
Jesus, unity, morality, worship,
in the verse that immediately precedes this chapter,
he says,
'And yet, I will show you a more excellent way.'

The more excellent way, is love.

Calling love an excellent way on a path to being more than mediocre
is risky.

Our western 21st century notion of love is pretty confused.

In our modern culture of consumption and sales,
we have been made into shoppers.

Looking for the best,

the best deal,

the best quality,

the greatest value,

looking for what we like, want, desire, the most.

And using the word excellent – when we get what we want.

We tend to end up defining love in a way that suits us,

that gives us what we want.

Even if we are aware enough to move beyond

loving that restaurant,

or loving that band,

We still tend to define love ego-centrally.

The wisdom of social media abounds with definitions of love.

Love means, loving yourself.

Love means never having to say you're sorry.

Love is freedom to be yourself.

Love is bliss, innocence, tranquility and happiness.

Which sounds excellent and self-centred, unrealistic and fragile.

James Howell writes of a chaplain Thomas Merton,

a famous monk who wrote in the 50's and 60's,

heard speak on 1 Corinthians 13.

“His exegesis was a bit strange,

Charity, love, meant good sportsmanship,

cricket, the decent thing, wearing the right clothes,

using the proper spoon, not being a cad.”

The more excellent way.

Love.

Love is at risk of being whatever we say it to be.

It is possible to let your heart be lead

by what it wants

I mean 'The heart wants what the heart wants?' right?

It is possible for the heart to lead you astray,
and call it love,
and call it the more excellent way.

One of the most important lessons for us in Scripture
is the warning that the heart can deceive,
the heart can grow hard,
the heart is not always pure.

Roberta Hestenes is a preacher and author who reminds us

“It is possible to lead a worship service but neglect to worship;
to sing hymns and songs of praise vigorously
without directing our thoughts to God;
to pray and speak of holy things
without engaging our inmost being;
to seek human approval rather than the approval of God.”

“The underlying tension has to do with not only what we do
but with why we do it;
it involves the inner springs of motivation and desire,
the condition of our heart before God.

The psalmist cries out:

"Search me, O God, and know my heart."

God does and God knows.

But do we know our own hearts?

Again and again, in straightforward teaching

and in parables that prick the conscience,

Jesus calls us to be careful

about play-acting our public spirituality

or showing off acts of visible piety for the wrong reasons."

Today's passage comes immediately after

Paul's teaching about spiritual gifts.

The Corinthian church were a competitive bunch.

They had separated the stands into cheering sections

for their favourite preacher.

They had tension between areas of faith,

over which roles were more significant, essential,

successful – excellent.

Teaching, faith, prophecy, administration, healing?

I don't know how it happened,

but 1 Corinthians 13,

one of the most powerful chapters of the whole Bible,

a beautiful, poetic, transformative, brilliant, strong piece of writing,

somehow got moved

to the greeting card section of Bible passages.

Nice, but then put away in a drawer.

However, if you just stop and stay with it for a moment,

it can have an impact that will transform your entire way of living.

After attempting to sort out all the jammering and yammering for influence,

success, for significance and importance,

for what is considered excellent,

Paul blows everything else written about excellence

right out of the water and redefines it.

He writes to the church,

I will show you the most excellent way.

If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels,
but have not love,
I am only a resounding gong or a clanging symbol.
If I have the gift of prophecy, if I'm smart as a whip,
if I have a faith that can move mountains,
but have not love,
I am nothing.

If I give it all away,
sacrifice my own life,
but have not love,
I gain nothing.

I will show you the most excellent way.

Love.

Just in case you were wondering what it looked like,

Paul defined it.

Long-suffering. Kind. It doesn't envy. It isn't puffed up.

It isn't rude or belligerent, self-seeking, or easily angered.

It doesn't keep record of wrongs.

It rejoices with the truth.

It's not about you.

In the words of Eugene Peterson.

It puts up with anything.

Trusts God always.

Always looks for the best.

Never looks back, but keeps going to the end.

Love never dies.

Love never fails.

Wanting be more than mediocre in faith,

striving for excellence

is about so much more,

than knowledge, or morality, or lifestyle or

the particular practices you use to help you worship Jesus

Excellence is taking the love we were given in Jesus,

and living it and sharing it and spreading it,

so there is more and so the kingdom grows.

It is a love that isn't about you.

It is loving God, with all your heart, soul, mind and strength.

It is loving your neighbour as yourself.

It is loving your enemy.

It is the hard work of moving beyond what is in your own heart,
to carry and share the heart of God

It is the love shown to you in Christ,
being freely shared with others.

That is the more excellent way.

Doing what we do as Christians,

not because we want to feel knowledgeable, or righteous, or good,
but because we have been loved by God.

Doing what we do the way we do it,
because love is the excellent way.

Love never fails.

The greatest of these is love.

It is love, for God, for one another,
and love for the person

who hasn't been introduced to God yet,
that is the heart of the Christian faith.
Love is the excellent way,
Love, as Paul defines it
makes everything else in faith,
more than mediocre.

Without it,

we are nothing.

Without love, our efforts, our ministries, our desires,
our time at all those meetings, the visits,
without love, it comes to nothing.

I leave you with a story of a more excellent way,
a more than mediocre way.

A small example of what the heart of God looks like.

It is a story told by Rebecca Pippert about an event
from the 70's which stuck with her.

His name was Bill.

He had wild hair, wore a T-shirt with holes in it,
jeans and no shoes.

This was literally his wardrobe for his four years of college.

He was a smart young man
and looked like he was pondering the esoteric.
He became a Christian while attending college.

Across the street from the campus was a well-dressed,
very conservative church.

They want to develop a ministry to the students,
but were not sure how to go about it.

One day Bill decided to worship there.

He walked into the church with no shoes,
jeans, his T-shirt, and wild hair.

The service had already started
and so Bill moved down the aisle looking for a seat.

The church was completely packed and he couldn't find a seat.

By now people were looking a bit uncomfortable,

but no one said anything.

Bill got closer and closer and closer to the pulpit,
and when he realized there were no seats,
he just squatted down right on the carpet in the aisle.

Although perfectly acceptable behaviour
at a college fellowship,
this was a scenario
this particular congregation had never witnessed before.

By now the people seemed uptight,
and the tension in the air was thickening.

Right about the time Bill took his 'seat',
an elder began slowly making his way down the aisle
from the back of the sanctuary.

The elder was in his eighties, had silver-gray hair,
a three-piece suit, and a pocket watch.
He was a godly man, very elegant, dignified, and courtly.

He walked with a cane and as he neared the boy,

church members thought,

‘You can’t blame him for what he’s going to do.

How can you expect a man of his age and of his background
to understand some college kid on the floor?’

It took a long time for the man to reach the boy.

The church was utterly silent

except for the clicking of the man’s cane.

All eyes were focused on him.

You couldn’t even hear anyone breathing.

The people were thinking,

The minister can’t even preach the sermon

until the elder does what he has to do.

Then they saw this elderly man drop his cane on the floor.

With great difficulty he sat down next to Bill

and worshipped with him so he wouldn’t be alone.”

If I speak in the tongues of men or of angels,

but do not have love,

I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal.

If I have the gift of prophecy

and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge,

and if I have a faith that can move mountains,

but do not have love, I am nothing.

If I give all I possess to the poor

and give over my body to the flames, to martyrdom

but do not have love, I gain nothing.

You can have knowledge, faith, generosity, commitment,

but all of this,

without love

is nothing.

The more excellent way,

the more than mediocre way,

is love.

You won't go wrong with love.

Love never fails.

There is faith, hope and love,

but the greatest, is love.

So you will be able to recognize it, Paul tells you what love,
true love looks like.

Love is patient.

Love is kind.

Love does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud.

Love is not rude. It is not self-seeking.

It is not easily angered.

It keeps no record of wrongs.

Love does not delight in evil or wrongdoing

but rejoices with the truth.

Love always protects, trusts, hopes, and perseveres.

Paul wrote,

I will show you the most excellent, more than mediocre, way.

There is coming a time when everything else will drop away.

There will be a day you won't need to have faith.

In heaven, God will be right in front of you.

You won't need faith.

There will be a day you won't need hope.

In heaven, God will be right there with you.

You won't need hope.

But even in heaven, love will remain.

Love never ends. Love never fails.

Love is the completion and perfection of faith.

Love, the kind shown to us in Christ, is the way of excellence.

Love is the greatest, the best of all we can offer.

Love is the most excellent way.

Love is and will always be more than mediocre.

Amen.