

*Let All You Do Be Done in Love*  
A Sermon on 1 Corinthians 1:10-18 by the Rev. Philip Major  
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One of the things I treasure about Paul's letters, is that we see some of the details of what is actually happening in the earliest congregations of Christians. In today's passage from first Corinthians, St. Paul writes, *For it has been reported to me by Chloe's people that there are quarrels among you, my brothers and sisters.*

From Paul, we receive the earliest, oldest written descriptions of the church. Eighteen years after the first Easter, women were seen as leaders in the church, as Paul casually mentions 'Chloe's people'. There is evidence of women leading the church in many of Paul's letters.

In this first chapter of Corinthians, Paul expands on his main concern for the letter, which is that this congregation has become divided into factions. Paul explains, *What I mean is that each of you says, "I belong to Paul," or "I belong to Apollos," or "I belong to Cephas," or "I belong to Christ." Has Christ been divided? Was Paul crucified for you?*

Paul is concerned about the factions and divisions in the congregations of early Christians. *I appeal to you, brothers and sisters, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you be in agreement and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same purpose.* Paul is appealing for there to be no divisions among them because there are divisions. We too are concerned about the destructiveness of factions and divisions in our nation, in our communities, and in our churches. So let's take a few minutes this morning to consider the behaviors that promote unity among us.

The first thing to be said is that some efforts that might seem to promote unity just create more hurt and division. Insisting on uniformity does not promote unity. Suppressing dissent does not promote unity. We might create more passion and a feeling that resembles unity by demonizing a group of outsiders, but that is not the sort of unity St. Paul is talking about. Paul is talking about the development of a community united in love. This is the theme of the entire letter, all sixteen chapters.

In the first four chapters, Paul describes the foundation for unity, which is humility. Paul writes, *God chose what is low and despised in the world.* Our strength comes from God and lies within God, not within ourselves.

Paul devotes an entire chapter to the idea that the leaders of the community must also be humble. Leaders are to be servant leaders. Paul writes, *Let no one boast about human leaders. What then is Apollos? What is Paul? Servants through whom you came to believe..I planted, Apollos watered, but it was God who gave the growth.*

In chapter five Paul turns to a difficult question that arises in every generation; how should the community deal with people who are breaking community guidelines, especially in ways that will hurt other people. The case in the church in Corinth should not be surprising to us. There is a member of the congregation who is having a casual sexual relationship with a woman who is married to someone else. It seems this kind of boundary violation happens in almost every time and place. It hurts the individuals involved and it hurts the community. We don't promote unity by turning a blind eye, by looking the other way. We promote unity by enforcing healthy boundaries in our communities. This creates trust in our communities. People learn they can trust others and they can trust leaders when boundaries are respected.

In chapter six the theme is reconciliation. We promote unity by asking for forgiveness when we have hurt others, and by forgiving others when they admit they have made a mistake. Sometimes a person comes to me and says, "I am having a hard time forgiving the person who hurt me." Eventually we may discover the primary problem is that the other person has never acknowledged the injury they have caused. Forgiveness is a two-way relationship. We promote unity by confessing the ways we have hurt others and by forgiving others when they ask for forgiveness.

In chapter seven, for the first time, Paul introduces a theme that will become ever more important in his later letters. We promote unity when we recognize one another as equals. We promote unity when we recognize men and women are equal in honor and authority. We promote unity when we recognize

different ethnic, religious, and cultural groups are equal. In Paul's situation, this meant recognizing that Jews and gentiles are equal.

In chapters eight through ten Paul discusses a topic that is especially relevant for us in America. There are situations where an action is lawful but it is not helpful to others. To paraphrase St. Paul, *All things are lawful, but not all things build up the community*. We have to consider that there are situations in which exercising our rights can be harmful to others. We promote unity by considering how our actions will affect other people.

In chapter eleven Paul is addressing the economic disparity in the church in Corinth. There were a few very wealthy members. There were many poor members. These class divisions were obvious, even as they were celebrating communion. Let's recall that Paul's intention was to write a letter, not to write the first books of the New Testament. Paul's language is unrefined and direct when he writes, "When you come together, it is not really to eat the Lord's Supper. For when the time comes to eat, each of you goes ahead with your own supper, and one goes hungry and another becomes drunk. What!" But Paul's message is relevant and clear; we promote unity by not dividing ourselves up into exclusive little social clubs. We promote unity by ensuring that no one is left out of any of our activities, ever.

Chapters twelve and thirteen are the best-known chapters of the letter and the culmination of Paul's argument about unity. Their impact is even stronger when read in the context of the whole letter. We begin to mature and become strong as a community when we have respect for the diverse gifts of each person. In chapter twelve Paul introduces an idea that is the foundation for our understanding of the church: *Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it*. We promote unity by honoring one another as members of the body of Christ.

At the end of chapter twelve, Paul concludes his discussion about the diversity of gifts with the best cliffhanger verse in all of Holy Scripture; *Strive for the greater gifts, and now I will show you a still more excellent way*. Then Paul gives us a new understanding of a most misunderstood word: love. *The one who loves is patient. The one who loves is not arrogant. The one who loves does not insist on their own way. The one who loves is not easily irritated or resentful about others. The one who loves rejoices in the truth.*

Paul was not writing about love as it applies to two people who are committing themselves to one another in marriage. Paul wrote these verses to urge this congregation to be united. If we desire community we seek to follow a certain way of approaching life. It is a way of being that brings a strength to our lives that never ends. Paul calls it 'love'. This was a new idea in Paul's time. No one had ever said this before.

For the sake of building your community be patient. For the sake of love, don't insist on doing things your way. Be reflective and examine yourself when you are feeling irritable or resentful. Don't blame others when resentment is growing in your heart. For the sake of building up your community, rejoice in the truth. Do all of these things for the sake of promoting unity. If we are unwilling to do these things, perhaps we are more concerned about ourselves than about our communities.

These two chapters are the high point, but Paul is not finished. In chapter fourteen the underlying theme is the importance of knowledge and understanding. Promote unity by pursuing honesty and transparency. Share knowledge with others. Work to create meaning and understanding. Be cautious about those who claim to have special powers or knowledge that has been revealed to them, but that is not bringing more understanding and connection to the community.

Paul has spent the first fourteen chapters talking about what we, as individuals, can do to promote unity. In chapter fifteen Paul talks about the work God is doing. Our unity is based, in part, on the understanding that the work of our community occupies just a small space in time and is part of the ongoing, everlasting work of God's kingdom. In chapter sixteen Paul finishes his letter with the words that hang on the wall of the Brewster Room, *Let all that you do be done in love*.

And so we are called to work as individuals and as a community to promote the unity of our church and our community. Each of us is called to take responsibility for our words, feelings, and actions. We are encouraged to devote ourselves to serving others and to consider the ways our actions affect others. We are invited to be part of a community of love, where each person is honored and respected as an equal part of the body of Christ.