

Talking in Tongues
1 Corinthians 13

How many of you have heard this text read at a wedding ceremony or renewal of vows?
And of those couples, how many do you know who have succeeded in sharing a love that is *never*
irritable or resentful? Mm-hmm.

You have likely heard that the apostle Paul did not intend his words for romantic lovebirds;
rather, he was writing to the *church* in a town called Corinth.
And while we're not having a wedding today...we *are* having church.

In this letter, Paul is offering his wisdom and insight to the people of that particular congregation.
This is a letter of pastoral concern and instruction to a church that has – as we all have – *new growth* to
discover within themselves.

Last week, in the chapter immediately preceding today's text, we read:

“Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit;
and there are varieties of services, but the same Lord;
and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who activates
all of them in everyone”.

Using that reading, Hal spoke of our ecumenical partners in the larger Church, and how we all have our
particular focus, our contribution to being the body of Christ. We're all good at something.
He also indicated how this spreading of gifts throughout the various churches also happens *within*
congregations; each person does her part, uses his gifts for the whole.

“To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good: ...wisdom...
knowledge...faith...healing...working of miracles...prophecy...
discernment of spirits...talking in tongues...interpretation of tongues”.

That was Chapter 12.

Now, immediately following his imagery of “many parts, one body”, Paul gets specific with the
Corinthian church about a few gifts in particular:

“If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels...”

So Paul notes the gift of speaking in tongues.

It's not a gift with which many of us have close experience or much understanding, I suspect –
but it's still a gift of the Spirit.

Paul's letter continues: “And if I have prophetic powers...” –
another good spiritual gift.

“And if I have faith, so as to remove mountains...”

Each of these – tongues, prophecy and faith – Paul has presented earlier as gifts for which the whole
Church should strive. Not that we'll all excel in each, but that we might work for them.

You've heard all of this, I know.

And how many times have you also heard the description of love that Paul goes into, emphasizing that,
without love, all of these precious gifts of the Spirit amount to nothing.
What he describes is not fleeting, romantic love, but something more visible.

Listen:

“Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never ends”.

No wonder Chapter 13 is a perennial favorite for wedding vows.

It's even better for our everyday!

Paul is reminding us that love cannot exist on its own, but must be a part of relationship, of community. *It must be a part of the church if we are to share our gifts.*

Without love – without patience and kindness –

the gift of healing is not healing;

without love – without setting aside arrogance or rudeness –

the gifts of wisdom and knowledge are useless;

without love – without the ability not to insist on its own way –

the gift of faith is nothing.

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Return with me to First Church Corinth.

As much as I find Paul's words beautiful, with language and imagery that catch my mind as well as emotion, his letter remains a correction [a reprimand] to the church.

...A loving and graceful correction,

otherwise I don't think we would cherish his message as much as we do;

but it's still a correction.

“If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels,

but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal”.

It seems the church at Corinth was quite taken with the particular spiritual gift it had manifested.

“Pastor Paul, we've been working on those gifts you've been preaching about.

And we've found we can speak in tongues – what an awesome spiritual gift!”

Yes, it is an awesome spiritual gift.

But it appears that Paul must remind them of 2 things:

First, without these actions called love, it only *okay*;

Second, it's not the *only* gift.

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How easy is it for any of us to get caught up in our strengths?

I know I much prefer doing things I'm good at!

Invite me to pray for your friend,

but please don't ask me to file your tax return.

And yet, there are places in my life where I simply have to work with numbers and forms – so working on my skills in that area is just plain good for me.

Consider the places in your own lives where you have done something to be proud of or where you excel. It feels good having that particular trophy! It's fulfilling to use our gifts – especially when they fill a need in the people around us.

But I feel reasonably certain most of us don't pin our entire self-worth and all of our future on this one accomplishment or ability –

although that *is* a pattern any of us can easily slide into.

The church can also fall into this pattern of self-satisfaction, as our short foray into the letter to the Corinthians reveals.

And so we hear, in our reading, Paul's reaction to their dedication to one strong gift to the neglect of others.

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Now, having been encouraged to strive for the spiritual gifts and to use them for the building up of Christ's body, I believe the Corinthian church *should* be proud of the ends their efforts have achieved.

Celebrate the tongues, I say!

But, as Paul counters, this is not *the* end.

While our reading today ends with what biblical editors' deemed Chapter 13, Paul's conversation with the church continues:

Chapter 14 of 1 Corinthians begins,

"Pursue love and strive for the spiritual gifts".

*Don't let it end there*, he cautions, *with the achievement of one particular spiritual expression*. Keep growing.

"Pursue love, and strive for the spiritual gifts".

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So now I wonder, as I often do:

what might this story be saying to our church -today?

If Paul were here, what would he have to write to us?

Where does our church –

either Plymouth or

the United Church of Christ overall or

we as individuals –

get stuck in our gifts?

Because I affirm that we have gifts to share with the universal Church.

What are they?

...One of the strengths that our denomination *and* Plymouth share is that we work hard for social justice – in the many paths through which that ministry manifests.

I give thanks for the ways our church strives to perfect the gift of social justice through responsibility toward the environment, and for peace through justice for all people.

I give thanks for the ways that our church strives to perfect the gift of social justice by supporting education in underdeveloped countries, and healthcare for the uninsured.

I give thanks in particular for the ways our church strives to perfect this gift by providing a place for women in the pulpit and for gays and lesbians to serve in ministry, without which I would never even be here.

We are rightfully proud of Plymouth and thankful of the UCC for striving in this special and necessary gift! This, I believe, is the power of Paul's emphasis on love as the force underlying all gifts.

Without love as the motivation, our pursuits would lack a foundation.

As a spiritual gift, love *is* the force behind our desire to affect God's world.

“Pursue love, and strive for the spiritual gifts”, Paul says.

While serving where our greatest gifts are needed in the world, strive for other gifts as well.

...So in what ways might we stretch our spiritual muscles?

What aspects of spirituality would you emphasize if you were seeking to grow?

Would you give yourself over more to your experience of worship?

Your time in fellowship?

Your means of prayer?

I wonder about this partially in view of what I have been learning recently from our youth program. It is inspiring how Plymouth's young people have shown great passion for developing in the direction of social justice – just as we as a church have modeled for them.

And so I ask, are there other things we'd like to model more strongly?

Like claiming for themselves a deeper prayer life

or making this worship space their own;

embracing stillness as well as action?

In what spiritual gifts might Plymouth or *we as individuals* still grow?

Not because we will be the best at it,

not so we may be boastful that we're trying,

not so we may be resentful that others aren't working as hard on the ministries we see as so important –

but to know Love; to encounter our God in new and meaningful ways.

As we gather today at our Annual Congregational Meeting, we will be bringing together in one place the various talents and abilities of our members. It's a time to celebrate and look forward.

We will cast our votes to support nominees willing to share their gifts of evangelism, stewardship or Deacons' ministries.

We will be called upon to accept a budget that represents the various services our congregation shares, not only in the *world* through social justice,

but right here where we worship in faith,

where we study in hope,

where we gather in love.

So may we strive for the gifts of the Spirit –

those which come easier and those in which we must grow.

And may we ever hold before us a vision of Love that is the one God: revealed in all her ways.

In Jesus Christ, head of the Church, I pray.

Amen.