**HEALTHY CHURCHES FOCUS ON LOVE**

**(1 Corinthians 12:31b-14:1a)**

 We have been working our way through Paul’s first letter to the Church at Corinth. As we have done so, we have been highlighting the actions and characteristic of healthy churches and healthy Christians. We come today to what may be the most important.

 More than 20 years ago I preached a message from John 13 on something Jesus said when He addressed the very thing that is discussed in today’s text. I entitled that message, “The Grand Essential.”

 To set the stage for today’s message, I’m going to read a rather long excerpt from a book written by the best-selling author Max Lucado. This comes from his book *In the Grip of Grace.* In what follows, Lucado compares the church to a ship and the members of a church to fellow sailors. The chapter from which this is drawn is, “The Fellowship.”

 God has enlisted us in His navy and placed us on His ship. The boat has one purpose—to carry us safely to the other shore.

 This is no cruise ship; it’s a battleship. We aren’t called to a life of leisure; we are called to a life of service. Each of us has a different task. Some, concerned with those who are drowning, are snatching people from the water. Others are occupied with the enemy, so they man the cannons of prayer and worship. Still others devote themselves to the crew, feeding and training the crew members.

 Though different, we are the same. Each can tell of a personal encounter with the captain, for each has received a personal call. He found us among the shanties of the seaport and invited us to follow Him. Our faith was born at the sight of His fondness, and so we went.

 We each followed Him across the gangplank of His grace onto the same boat. There is one captain and one destination. Though the battle is fierce, the boat is safe, for our captain is God. The ship will not sink. For that, there is no concern.

 There is concern, however, regarding the disharmony of the crew. When we first boarded, we assumed the crew was made up of others like us. But as we’ve wandered these decks, we’ve encountered curious converts with curious appearances. Some wear uniforms we’ve never seen, sporting styles we’ve never witnessed. “Why do you look the way you do?” we ask them. “Funny,” they reply. “We were about the ask the same of you.”

 The variety of dress is not nearly as disturbing as the plethora of opinions. There is a group, for example, who clusters every morning for serious study. They promote rigid discipline and somber expressions. “Serving the captain is serious business,” they explain. It’s no coincidence that they tend to congregate around the stern.

 There is another regiment deeply devoted to prayer. Not only do they believe in prayer, they believe in prayer by kneeling. For that reason, you always know where to locate them; they are at the bow of the ship.

 And then there are a few who staunchly believe real wine should be used in the Lord's Supper. You’ll find them on the port side.

 Still another group has positioned themselves near the engine. They spend hours examining the nuts and bolts of the boat. They’ve been known to go below deck and not come up for days. They are occasionally criticized by those who linger on the top deck, feeling the wind in their hair and the sun on their face. “It’s not what you learn,” those topside argue. “It’s what you feel that matters.”

 And, oh, how we tend to cluster.

 Some think once you’re on the boat, you can’t get off. Others say you’d be foolish to go overboard, but the choice is yours.

 Some believe you volunteer for service; others believe you were destined for the service before the ship was even built.

 Some predict a storm of great tribulation will strike before we dock; others say it won’t hit until we are safely ashore.

 There are those who speak to the captain in a personal language. There are those who think such languages are extinct.

 There are those who think the officers should wear robes; there are those who think there should be no officers at all, and there are those who think we are all officers and should all wear robes.

 And, oh, how we tend to cluster.

 And then there is the issue of the weekly meeting at which the captain is thanked and His words are read. All agree on its importance, but few agree on its nature. Some want it loud, others quiet. Some want ritual, others spontaneity. Some want to celebrate so they can meditate; others meditate so they can celebrate. Some want a meeting for those who’ve gone overboard. Others want to reach those overboard but without going overboard and neglecting those on board.

 And, oh, how we tend to cluster.

 The consequence is a rocky boat. There is trouble on deck. Fights have broken out. Sailors have refused to speak to each other. There have even been times when one group refused to acknowledge the presence of others on the ship. Most tragically, some adrift at sea have chosen not to board the boat because of the quarreling of the sailors.

 “What do we do? . . . How can there be harmony on the ship?”

 In 1 Corinthians 12 & 14 Paul addressed some controversial and potentially divisive matters. He discussed spiritual gifts, their nature and use, as well as what takes place in our worship services. Wisely, he separated those two weighty chapters with words of comfort and peace. We call chapter 13 the love chapter. Love is the grand essential. It is the one thing upon which healthy churches focus. In a sense, chapter 13 begins with the closing words of chapter 12 and ends with the opening words of chapter 14. Let’s read 12:31b through 14:1a. From those verses, there are four things I want to say.

1. **HEALTHY CHURCHES FOCUS ON THE PRIORITY OF LOVE.**

 In vv. 1-3 we see that love is absolutely essential. The Christian life simply cannot be lived apart from love. Without love, all the other gifts are absolutely meaningless.

1. *Love Is Necessary for Speaking.*

 Paul introduces the gift of tongues in chapter 12. In chapter 14 he shows how that gift was being abused. Here in this verse, Paul contends that it does not matter what language you speak, either earthly or a heavenly one, if you speak without love, you are just making noise.

 Both of my children are musical. They both played in band. My son also played in the orchestra. Through the years I went to band concerts and orchestra concerts. No one time did in all of those occasions did I ever witness a cymbal solo. Cymbals can evoke a certain feeling if they are used sparingly at a certain, key moments in a piece of music, but no one wants to be subjected to a cymbal solo.

 No one wants to hear someone blather on if that person is devoid of love. He or she is guilty of noise pollution.

1. *Love Is Necessary for Serving.*

 Look at v. 2. It matters not what I say, know, or do if I lack love. If love is absent from my life, I am just a big zero. We forfeit any blessing that might come if something other than love prompts our service.

 We are to speak the truth in love (Eph. 4:15). We are to serve one another in love (Gal. 5:13). Love is to be the animating force of our spiritual gifts. Otherwise, everything we do tends to be self-serving.

1. *Love Is Necessary for Sacrificing.*

 Notice v. 3. If we were to sacrifice all of our money or our own body for the welfare of others for any reason other than love, we would gain nothing, nada, zilch.

 Do you remember the story who placed her last two copper coins in the temple treasury? There were others there that day who likely gave large sums of money. According to Jesus, the most valuable gift given that day was the offering of that widow.

 The motivation behind our actions mean more than what we actually do.

 In his commentary on this passage, Jack MacGorman compared two different gifts involving two different military leaders. The first was a gift given my Napoleon to his wife, Josephine. He gave her a tiara featuring a single emerald accented by over 800 diamonds. MacGorman referred to it as “one of the shoddiest gifts of history.” He claimed that Napoleon gave that as a substitute for his love. They divorced not long afterwards.

 In contrast, one of the greatest gifts of history was a drink of water. This gift was not given by a military leader; it was given to one. It was given to King David. Look at 2 Samuel 23:17-27.

 What makes something valuable is not the gift itself but what lies behind it. If love is behind it, the gift is priceless. If not, it is worthless.

 Are you being motivated by love for the Lord?

1. **HEALTHY CHURCHES FOCUS ON THE PICTURE OF LOVE.**

 Look at vv. 4-7. Here, Paul shows what love looks like. In these verses we are shown by positive and negative attributes of love. Paul uses 15 words to describe love. Each one is a verb in the Greek language. True love is not passive; it is always at work.

1. *Look at the Positive Picture, What Love Does Do.*
* Love is Patient. It suffers long.

 That means that love has a long temper or a long fuse. It doesn’t give up on others easily or quickly.

* Love is Kind. It acts kindly.

 Love is thoughtful and actively seeks to be helpful. A kind person is really a loving person because kindness is simply love at work.

* Love Rejoices in the Truth.

 Paul started with 2 positives and then listed 8 negative aspects of love. He finishes the list by telling us 5 more things that love does. Love applauds when truth wins.

* Love Bears All Things. It protects.

 Love shields those that it loves. It doesn’t parade the sins and failings of others before our watching world. Instead, it covers where it can instead of gossiping and unveiling.

* Love Believes All Things. It trusts.

 This does not mean that love is gullible. It does mean that the loving person looks for the best instead of expecting the worst. MacGorman wrote, “It is better to believe in others and be deceived by some than to go through life and be suspicious of all.”

* Love Hopes All Things. It is optimistic.

 Love looks on the bright side. It is not a predictor of gloom and doom. You can’t be an Eeyore and a loving believer at the same time.

* Love Endures All Things. It perseveres.

 The Greek word Paul used is a compound. It literally means, “to remain under.” Love endures great pressure and strain without collapsing. It doesn’t give in and doesn’t give up.

1. *Look at the Positive Picture, What Love Does Not Do.*
* Love Does Not Envy.

 This means that love only enables us to weep with those who weep, but it also equips us to rejoice with those who rejoice. That is usually the harder of the two. Can you rejoice with the person who gets the promotion you wanted, who gets the new car you can’t afford, who gets married while you are still single? Can you rejoice with those who rejoice? If you can, you are a loving person.

* Love Does Not Boast.

 Love doesn’t call attention to itself and what it has. Those who constantly raise themselves up are also lowering others at the same time. True love refuses to do that.

* Love Is Not Arrogant.

 Love keeps one from strutting about and being puffed up. Love will keep us from having an over-inflated ego. The believers in Corinth had a problem with that; so do we.

* Love Is Not Rude.

 Love is courteous. It doesn’t offend others on purpose. It will keep you from behaving in a rude manner.

* Love Does Not Insist on Its Own Way.

 Those who love are not constantly looking out for #1, so to speak. They are not seeking their own advantage. They are not out promoting themselves at every turn.

 I realize that professional sports is business, and I understand that a professional athlete has a limited time in which to play professionally. I have a problem when they break their contract in an effort to get a better one. They don’t care about the team or the fans. It is all about them, and that is not the way that love acts.

* Love It Not Irritable.

 Love doesn’t lose its cool. We have all met people who live on constant simmer. It doesn’t take much for them to boil over all over others. That is not the way of the one who loves.

* Love Is Not Resentful.

 Other versions say that it keeps no record of wrongs. In other words, love has a short memory. Loving people will still argue, but they won’t rehearse the wrongs they have endured. If you can tick off all the times that a person has wronged you, something is wrong. You are the one who is not acting in a loving manner.

* Love Does Not Rejoice at Wrongdoing.

 Love does not grieve when wrong wins. We should not be able to find sin entertaining. Much of what tries to pass as entertainment is the glorification of sin. If your favorite show on TV is about who is sinning against whom, you need to find another show.

 One of the greatest stories that depicts the triumph of love is found in the life of Abraham Lincoln. One of Lincoln’s early political enemies was Edwin Stanton. It seemed that Stanton could never pass on an opportunity to insult Lincoln. He called Lincoln “a low cunning clown” and “the original gorilla.” He once remarked, “It is ridiculous for people to go to Africa to see a gorilla when they could find one easily in Springfield, Illinois,” which Just happened to be Lincoln’s home.

 To his credit, Lincoln never responded to Stanton’s slanderous accusations and insults. Furthermore, when he became President, Lincoln chose Stanton to be his secretary of war. When friends asked him why he chose Stanton for that lofty position after all the things Stanton had said against him, Lincoln answered, “Because he is the best man.”

 After Lincoln’s assassination, as his body lay in state, Stanton looked into his coffin and said through his tears, “There lies the greatest ruler of men the world has ever seen.”

 Love triumphed. Focus your eyes on love whenever and wherever it is pictured.

1. **HEALTHY CHURCHES FOCUS ON THE PERMANENCE OF LOVE.**

 Look at vv. 8-13. Like the Olympic flame, love will never be extinguished. The spiritual gifts will be at work for a short period of time. Love, however, will extend on throughout eternity.

 When you marry someone, you marry them because of their character, not because of their looks. Physical beauty fades, but inner beauty remains.

 Love is an inner beauty that will last. Let’s give our time and attention to what will last.

1. **HEALTHY CHURCHES FOCUS ON THE PURSUIT OF LOVE.**

 We find this in the first two words of 14:1. This is an imperative. That means it is not optional. We are commanded to pursue love. We are to go where love goes. We follow it.

 I am reminded of Ruth when Naomi told her daughter-in-law Ruth to return to her people. Ruth gave a beautiful response in which she pledged her love and loyalty to Naomi. Let me paraphrase her answer and connect it to a pledge to follow love.

 “Do not urge me to leave you or to return from following you. For where love goes, I will go. Where love lodges, I will lodge. Love’s people shall be my people. Love’s God shall be

my God. If love ever dies or is buried, let me die and be buried there with love.”

 One pastor who was know for being a great leader once said the if you want to become a great leader, ask yourself whenever you face a decision, “What would a great leader do. Then, do that.”

 If you want to be a great lover of people, ask yourself throughout the day, “What would a great lover do. Then, do that.”

 There are many things upon which a church can choose to focus. The big three are buildings, budgets, and baptisms. I think those things will take care of themselves if we focus on loving God and loving people.