

“Without It, Nothing”
1 Corinthians 13:1-13
4th Sunday after Pentecost

June 28, 2020
Westminster, Greenville
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Back when I first began my work in ministry, some 22 years ago, I had just moved to Texas from Michigan, was getting to know the first congregation I served—and so...I decided right from the outset,

to make known to them
just like I made known to all of you—
my love and devotion for the New York Yankees.

This, I’m sure, comes as a great shock to you.

And the senior pastor at that church said to me, sometime during the first month I was there, “Oh, Ben, don’t worry—you’ll be rooting for the Texas Rangers before you know it.”

Of course, I disagreed.
I knew the Yankees would always be my favorite team.

So I told him this, and he replied, “You know, Ben, back when I was a boy, growing up in the late 50s and early 60s, I was a Yankees fan too.”

“Really?” I said. “So what changed?”

“Well,” he replied, “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 put an end to childish ways.”

Truth be told, I did not see that one coming.

It does, however, raise the question of what exactly Paul was referring to when he spoke to that church in Corinth long ago...
of “childish ways”?

Do you know the context for these well-known words, from 1st Corinthians 13?

We often hear them at a wedding, but the original setting was NOT a celebration.

It was a fight.

The Corinthians were in conflict with each other.

They were making distinctions among the membership, claiming that some had better gifts, more important gifts, than other members in their church.

So...when Paul talks about childish ways, he’s referring in part to their bickering. He’s talking about how they think about love, how they talk about love, and how they fail to imagine what the love of God really means.

Now the word that Paul uses here for love...

the word that he holds before them as the standard,

the model, the compass,

and the goal...is AGAPE.

Do you know that word, agape?

It’s a Greek word.

You might recall that there were different words for love in Greek.

“Eros” was romantic love.

“Phileo” was love between friends.

“Agape” ...meant something else.

A love that runs deeper, that’s more profound.

Martin Luther King, Jr. once described agape as “creative, redemptive, good will to all...It is an overflowing love which seeks nothing in return.”¹

It’s the kind of love Jesus talked about when he said, “Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you...”

Agape is about refusing to make distinctions when sharing the love of God with other people. About NOT putting some people in this box, and other people in THAT box.

Agape is not about sentiment or feeling.
It’s about hard work.
It takes discipline. And practice. And endurance.

In fact, the image that Paul uses right BEFORE this chapter is fascinating.

Chapter 12, verse 31, goes like this:
“I will show you a still more excellent way.”

Another scholar translated it like this:
“And yet I will go on to show you a still higher path.”²

A higher path...like climbing a mountain.
Agape, in Paul’s imagination, is like mountain climbing.

¹ From “The Power of Nonviolence,” by Martin Luther King, Jr., in *A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings and Speeches of Martin Luther King, Jr.*, edited by James M. Washington, New York: HarperCollins, 1986.

² Translation by James Moffat, found in Kenneth Bailey’s commentary, *Paul Through Mediterranean Eyes: Cultural Studies in 1 Corinthians*, Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2011.

Hard work. Strenuous work.

As one commentator puts it:

“It requires planning, training, energy, commitment, a huge investment of time...”

AND

“It is also exciting, compelling...the view from the top, on a clear day, is thrilling beyond measure.”³

That’s AGAPE!

All of which makes me wonder:

How would Paul write this letter, if he were inviting you and me to climb the mountain of agape today?

The best-selling author and professor, Brene Brown, tells the story of speaking at an event not too long ago.

During her talk, she mentioned how she and her father were looking forward to skeet shooting with her son, teaching him how to do it.

One woman in the audience replied:

“I’m very surprised to hear that you’re a gun lover. You don’t strike me as the NRA type.”

Brown replied:

“I’m not sure what you mean by ‘gun lover’ or ‘the NRA type.’”

³ Bailey, *ibid.*

The woman shot back:

“If you’re teaching your child how to shoot a gun, then I’m assuming that you support gun ownership and the NRA.”

Brene Brown took a deep breath and said:

“You’re one for two on your assumptions. I do support responsible gun ownership. I do not...support the NRA...”

Back and forth they went.

Finally, the woman got so angry, she spit out, “You either support guns or you don’t.”

Brene Brown took another deep breath, and said, “...I don’t think you’re hearing me. I’m not going to participate in a debate where the issue is reduced to *You either support guns or you don’t*. It’s too important. If you want to have a longer conversation about it...”

But the woman was not having any such conversation. She excused herself and stormed away.⁴

What do you think Paul would say about agape, in our divided society today?

There are plenty of issues that get any one of us emotional. Issues that are worthy of debate.

I can imagine Paul writing something like this:

⁴ Brene Brown, *Braving the Wilderness: The Quest for True Belonging and the Courage to Stand Alone*, New York: Random House, 2017.

If I have great knowledge about immigration, or if I have all sorts of experience studying cycles of poverty, or I've done my homework about mass incarceration, so that I can defeat anyone in an argument about this particular issue...

but have not agape, I am nothing.

Agape is patient, Paul writes.

Agape is kind, Paul writes.

Of course, I hear that...and I want to start heading back down the mountain.

I still want to make distinctions.

Not just distinctions in points of view.

But distinctions between PEOPLE.

I want to be patient with this person, but not that person.

I want to be kind to someone who is a kind to me,
but NOT to someone who criticizes me.

To which Paul would say: never mind the Yankees.

What you just described, Ben—where you get to distinguish who you're going to be kind to?

Who you're going to practice agape with?

That's your childish way.

The good news is that Jesus knows this.

Jesus knows our childish ways when it comes to love.

Which is why Jesus was always warning us about making distinctions.

Take our first lesson for today.
 Parable of the tax collector and the Pharisee.
 The Pharisee is all about distinctions:

“God, I thank you that I am not like other people:
 thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax collector.”

Notice, that everything the Pharisee says is TRUE!
 He’s not a thief. He’s not an adulterer.
 He gives 10% of his wealth away.

The problem with the Pharisee was not that he failed to do good things with his life. The problem was that he was missing the POINT of his life.

Sharing God’s love...without distinction.
 Without asking—what’s in it for me?
 The point is AGAPE.

Jesus talked about it all the time.
 Do you remember the parable of the sower?

How the sower throws the seed with abandon, recklessly, letting it land here and there and on every kind of soil.

We’re used to hearing that the seed is the Word of God—what if that Word...agape?

God throws God’s love without distinction, because that’s how God behaves.

Which means, as followers of Jesus, it’s also how God wants us to behave...

The late preacher Will Campbell once wrote about a turning point in his life and his faith.

Campbell was active in the Civil Rights movement of the 1960s.

He remembers the moment when a seminary student named Jonathan Daniel was killed.

Campbell knew Jon Daniel.
He liked Jon Daniel.

Jonathan Daniel had come down from Massachusetts to Alabama to participate in efforts that would allow more black citizens to vote. While there, he was jailed for those efforts, and shortly thereafter, a man named Thomas Coleman shot and killed Jonathan Daniel for those efforts.

Will Campbell heard about the murder from his friend named P.D.

P.D. East and Will Campbell had known each other for years, and they had a history of engaging in friendly arguments about religion and faith and so forth...

So P.D. approached Will Campbell:

“Brother, what you reckon your friend Mr. Jesus thinks of all this?”

Campbell replied that he thought Jesus was pretty sad about it. But P.D. was itching for something more.

So he framed the question differently:

“Which of these two...[Jonathan Daniel, who has been murdered, and Thomas Coleman, who murdered him]...do you think God loves the most?”

Campbell recalls:

“I made some feeble attempt to talk about God loving the sinner and not the sin...But P.D. shook his hands...”

“Which one of these two...does God love the most? Does [God] love...Jonathan the most? Or does [God] love...Thomas Coleman the most?”

And Campbell writes:

“Suddenly everything became clear...”⁵

What became clear to Campbell that day?
The unfathomable depths of God’s love.

That just as God pursues the faithful, the devoted, the Jonathan Daniels of this world...so does God pursue the Thomas Colemans of the world.

And Will Campbell spent the rest of his ministry pursuing the Thomas Colemans of the world, talking with them, meeting with them, trying to help them see the problem with their views, trying to help them know the power of God’s love.

Will Campbell spent his life climbing the mountain of agape...

⁵ Will D. Campbell, *Brother to a Dragonfly*, New York: Continuum, 1977.

But agape isn't just something we practice out in society.
It's also something that affects our friendships.
Even our family, those we love the most.

Another Will, Will Willimon, describes a mother he knows, who once got angry at her son.

“Our son has been putting us through hell,” she said.

“Didn't even know where he was for months until last night. My husband and I were eating dinner, and suddenly, without warning, he bursts through the front door and begins cursing us,
demanding money,
refusing to join us at the table.

After an ugly scene, he stormed down the hall and slammed the door to his room.”

“I walked down the hall and said, ‘Son, can we talk?’ I just want to talk.’

“I could hear him curse me from inside his bedroom.
I tried to open the door. It was locked.”

So this mother went into the garage, got a big ol' hammer, walked back to her son's room, and with one blow knocked the doorknob clean off the door—taking about a third of the door with it.

“Then I lunged at my surprised-looking son, grabbed him...and said, ‘I'm not going to put up with this ___ anymore. You are better than this! I gave birth to you, went into labor for you, and I'm not giving you away!’”⁶

⁶ William H. Willimon, *Who Will Be Saved?*, Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2008.

You know what that was?
Not just anger.
It was AGAPE.

A love that refuses to give up on anyone.

It is a love that makes all the difference, Paul said,
when it comes to how we work, how we play,
and how we practice our faith...

Speaking of playing, I was thinking of doing some mountain
climbing this summer.

I'm not talking about Paris Mountain.
Or Caesar's Head.
I'm talking about Mt. Agape...

It's going to be a challenging climb, to be sure.
I might even fall a few times along the way.
But I hear the view at the top is tremendous.

I was hoping for some company.
I was hoping you might join me.

Amen.