

1 Corinthians 13:1-13 Fourth Sunday after Epiphany February 1, 1998

*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. 2And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. 3If I give away all my possessions, and if I hand over my body so that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing.*

*4Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant 5or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; 6it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. 7It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.*

*8Love never ends. But as for prophecies, they will come to an end; as for tongues, they will cease; as for knowledge, it will come to an end. 9For we know only in part, and we prophesy only in part; 10but when the complete comes, the partial will come to an end. 11When 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. 12For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known. 13And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love.*

Good people.

That's how I like to think of us as good people.

I like to divide the world into good people and not so good people.

Sometimes I just know who is who. Even the first moment I meet someone I sense whether they are good people or not - kind, sincere, trustworthy.

We are good people.

We all know that God likes the good people best of all.

Good people pay their taxes. Good people support the church. Good people give some to the poor. Good people believe in God.

Good people.

Most people are good people.

Not like those policemen who betray the trust of the community in taking payments to guard drug shipments.

Not like a president who will not stay within the boundaries of a marriage.

Not like the wealthy who want more and more for themselves and never share.

Maybe you are wondering how I know who the good people are? I look at scripture.

Good people love – “Love one another as I have loved you,” taught Jesus. Good people do just that.

Good people love with the kind of love Paul spoke of: *Love is patient, love is kind, love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. Love does not insist on its own way, it is not irritable or resentful. Love does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.*

There are people who aren't patient, certainly who are not kind. In the church I see them. In my mind I put a little mark beside their names. Have you ever done that? - remembered who is always irritable? Resentful? Arrogant? Rude? Maybe for a day or a week or a season of grief there is an excuse, but some people would need an excuse for a lifetime. It is kind of hard to think of them as good people.

Pushy people, insisting on their own way? Hard to be around.

What are they missing? Love.

Love is the mark of good people.

I wonder if I would still divide up the world in this way if love was in me. Could there be a "we" for me that did not include every "you" if love was in me? *Love bears all things and believes all things and hopes all things and endures all things.* Even pushy people –rudeness, boastfulness and arrogance. Where there is love there is hope for people such as these – hope for all the good people who think they are just a little better - for all the irritable and resentful ones.

When St. Paul begins this song on love to show the Corinthians a still more excellent way he uses the pronoun I. *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. And if I have prophetic powers and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith so as to remove mountains but do not have love, I am nothing. If I give away all my possessions, and if I hand over my body so that I may boast, but do not have love I gain nothing.*

I can tell when my neighbor is irritable. I can see when you are resentful. I know when my enemy is insisting on her own way.

But love is invisible.

I could give you everything I own, and still not love you. You might never know whether I did or did not - but Paul is suggesting God knows. People are impressed with lots of things - wonderful knowledge, sacrificial gifts, the religious ecstasy of speaking in tongues.

People are impressed with many things - but God is only pleased by a clean heart, a new and right spirit within me. Love.

Yes, love is invisible - even God's love.

As Jesus died on the cross what was visible was a man abandoned. A fool. They mocked him because no love from God was visible for him - not even love from family or friend.

The good people all gathered together and left him outside of the circle.

Love was certainly invisible there and then.

But the almighty God declares that that day was love filled to overflowing. Jesus dying is God's love for you, for everyone outside of any circles that can be drawn. Jesus dying is God's love for me, even me, a drawer of those circles that exclude.

Only dying is visible there, only dying can be seen.

But love can be believed, and trusted and hoped for where only death can be seen.

God raised Jesus: for an instant love visible, Jesus seen, touched. God raised Jesus then seen no more but for all time told - love of God declared.

And in the bread and cup tasted, touched, received.

So I will change Paul's song into a new song for me. And as I sing it now God grant it be the new song of your life too:

If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have Christ, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and knowledge and if I have all faith so as to remove mountains, but do not have Christ, I am nothing. If I give away my all my possessions and if I hand over my body so that I may boast, but do not have Christ, I gain nothing. Christ is patient, Christ is kind, Christ is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. Christ does not insist on his own way, he is not irritable or resentful, Christ does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. Christ bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Christ never ends.