

I Corinthians 13

By David Chandler

[This was my first chapel talk at Webb School.]

Scripture Reading: I Corinthians 13 (Revised Standard Version)

If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not 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 have not love, I am nothing. If I give away all I have, and if I deliver my body to be burned, but have not love, I gain nothing.

Love is patient and kind; love is not jealous or boastful; it is not arrogant or rude. Love does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice at wrong, but rejoices in the right. Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

Love never ends; as for prophecies, they will pass away; as for tongues, they will cease; as for knowledge, it will pass away. For our knowledge is imperfect and our prophecy is imperfect; but when the perfect comes, the imperfect will pass away.

When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child; when I became a man, I gave up childish ways. For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall understand fully, even as I have been fully understood.

So faith, hope, love abide, these three; but the greatest of these is love.

I Corinthians 13 is one of those passages many of us have heard since childhood. It is clearly a high point of the New Testament. You might call it sublime, poetic, or lofty. Sometimes I have grown tired of hearing it read aloud. It tends to come out a bit syrupy and full of sentimentalism. I say to myself, "Here we go again."

There are a couple of passages in the text, however, that have perplexed me and caused me to take another look at the message of the chapter. "When I was a child I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child: when I became a man I gave up childish ways." That is an interesting verse. I remember my grandfather quoting it to me often when he wanted me to quit playing around and get some work done. It is an interesting image, but what does it mean in the context of this hymn of love?

The next passage also seems incongruous: "For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face." Again, it is a beautiful image, but what does it mean in this context? How do these verses all tie together?

To get a clearer picture of the message of I Corinthians 13 we must take a look at the book as a whole. I Corinthians is a reprimand to a "holy roller" church with a holier than thou attitude. The church in Corinth had speaking in tongues, prophesying, healing, and they probably even had a few people literally rolling in the isles. Disturbances in the church were the occasion for Paul's letter. People were also engaging in heavy spiritual one-up-man-ship. People would brag, "I was converted by Paul," or "I was converted by Peter," followed by the inevitable, "La-de-da, I knew Jesus Himself!" This seems to be the level of pettiness they were into.

I Corinthians 13 is an answer to anyone who thinks he has an inside track on religion. Look again: "For now we see in a mirror dimly...Now I know in part..." Whatever happened to infallibility? inerrancy? dogma? If the church is so secure in its absolutes why is it so fragmented? It almost sounds as if Paul is making himself out to be an agnostic! At least he is saying that true religion requires a heavy dose of agnosticism along with it! Despite Paul's depth of religious experience, his dramatic conversion, and his deep communion with God, he senses that he has only a hint of the truth. But he has a deep conviction that with that hint he is onto something real. He doesn't have the *whole* picture, but he is convinced it is the *real* picture.

That reality is love. He didn't figure it out; he experienced it. He experienced the love of God and it changed him. In a way, love is a new absolute, but it is a different kind of absolute. Love doesn't have all the answers. Love gives no reason for pride or boasting. One who loves recognizes that his own worth comes from his being loved by God. One who feels God's love also recognizes the worth of his neighbor because that neighbor is equally loved by God.

Love puts all other values into perspective. Plato's absolutes were the True, the Good and the Beautiful. But these are sterile without Love. Perhaps one could say Love is the personal side of Truth, Goodness, and Beauty.

Love is positive. It affirms good in all its forms and it actively creates good. In the closing verses of I Corinthians 13 Paul is saying that somehow love is behind it all. Love is a clue to reality. To know God and to share his love is the basis of spiritual maturity. One who loves has put away childish things.