

### How do we love when faith is at stake?

#### Paul dealt with selfish attitudes in Corinth

We could call the church in Corinth in southern Greece Paul's problem child. Instead of showing genuine love for each other, some members were boasting that they were more gifted than others. The richer ones looked down on the poor. They formed cliques and ignored some members. They were more concerned about doing what they wanted instead of what was most loving for others. Members, especially newer ones whose faith was weak, were ready to leave the church. Those who were boasting were in danger of trusting in themselves. Their faith was in danger.

For the sake of their faith, the Apostle Paul wrote to them and bluntly pointed out how loveless they were. Then he used himself as an example of how they should love one another. As the one who shared God's Word with them, Paul had a right to expect the congregation to support him. After all, a soldier gets paid for his work; someone working in a vineyard gets to eat a few of the grapes; the one who watches the flock gets to drink some of the milk; even an ox that is working gets to eat some grain. Paul had every right to expect that the people in the congregation would support him with food and money. Instead, Paul waved that right. He stayed up late making tents to earn money so that the congregation did not have to support him. He did not want anyone to think that he was preaching just so he could get money. He demonstrated that same loving attitude wherever he was. If he was visiting with some Jews, he would follow all the Jewish traditions even though he did not have to. He did not want anything to get in the way of his chance to tell people about Jesus. He explained (:22,23), **"I have become all things to all people so that by all possible means I might save some. <sup>23</sup>I do all this for the sake of the gospel."** When faith was a stake, Paul demonstrated an extra measure of love.

#### Selfish attitudes infect us

It's easy to criticize the callous Corinthians, but they were simply expressing the sinful nature that lived in them and lives in us. As we explained in last week's Bible class, "All of us are narcissists – that is, self-centered and more concerned with what we want than with what others need. It's just that some of us do a better job of covering it up than

others." All of us are infected with sin and our natural reaction is to be selfish. And if we do not get our way, we are NOT happy.

Our country is based on the concept of individual rights. "I have a right to speak my mind, to play my music as loud as I want, to dress like I want, to sleep with whomever I want," and on and on. A culture that is focused on our individual rights only encourages our sinful nature. Our Lord wants us to pause and think things through. What is most important for everyone in the whole world? Believing in Jesus as their Savior. It does not matter how rich or talented or privileged someone is, without Jesus, there is no heaven for them, only eternal suffering. So, as we live our lives, our greatest goal is not to "do what we want." Our greatest goal is to hang on to Jesus and help others connect with him.

Or, at least it should be. None of us can honestly say that we have always been primarily concerned about someone's spirituality. I/We talk to our neighbors and friends about all sorts of things for hours, but we hesitate to ask them if they have a church home, or if they know what Jesus did for them, let alone invite them to church with us. If a relative moves in with his girlfriend before they are married, do we just ignore it or do we gently express concern about their relationship with their Lord? If someone is not coming to church for a while, do we think evil about them, complaining that they should be paying their fair share of the budget? Do we ignore them and say that it's the pastor's job to reach out to them, or do we give them a phone call or email to see how they're doing? How often do we really share our faith or express concern about someone's spirituality? Not so much. Most often we, "don't want to go there."

#### Jesus was selfless in saving us

When Paul pointed out to the Corinthians how he had waved his right of a salary for their sake and refrained from certain foods, he was not bragging or patting himself on the back. He was giving examples they would really connect with them. Everyone in that congregation realized that they really should have paid Paul. They had extra money in their pockets because of his loving kindness. That had an impact on them. They were all humbled a bit. If you read 2 Corinthians, you'll see that their behavior changed.

Even though Paul used himself as an example, he made it clear that he was simply expressing the same kind of love that Jesus showed to him and all the world. In our first reading, the prophet Isaiah explained how the promised Messiah – Jesus – would not just give up some money. He

gave up his very life. Even though he was perfect, he let himself be considered the worst sinner of all and took the punishment for every sin as he hung on the cross. He sacrificed his life to give us forgiveness. Isaiah said he would rise from the dead to guarantee us eternal life in heaven. In today's Gospel, Jesus told his disciples for the third time that he was going to be tortured and executed. None of the disciples expressed any concern or sympathy. Instead, James and John asked for a special favor. The other disciples were upset, probably because they did not think of it earlier. They were selfish. Jesus explained to his selfish disciples that the people of the world, the unbelievers, argue and fight about who is more important or more powerful. They like to boss others around. But that's not how God's people should behave. We are here to help others. He explained (Mark 10: 45), "**Even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.**"

Whereas we are not always so concerned about other people's salvation, Jesus was completely concerned about salvation for the whole world. Every day, he resisted temptation and lived a perfect life so that he could give you the perfection you needed in order to get into heaven. Every day, he interacted with people and guided them to a greater understanding of salvation. Every day, he gently corrected people who were going in the wrong direction. In today's Gospel, Jesus' disciples were scared that he was walking toward Jerusalem. They knew what was waiting there for him and they were right. Jesus' enemies did arrest him and coordinated his execution. Instead of demanding his rights as true God and walking away, though, Jesus submitted. He let them rip off his clothes, pound spikes through his body and hoist him up on the cross for everyone to laugh at. He was completely selfless in order to save you and me and the whole world. As we more and more appreciate what Jesus did for us, we are more and more willing to serve others in love, even if it means giving up some things we would like.

It is my sincere prayer that we become more and more loving as a congregation. If you do not know someone, introduce yourself and gain a new friend. Visit after worship and get to know each other better. We need each other's support, especially as the world becomes more and more hostile to Christians. I also pray that I, and we, become more active in sharing our faith.

#### We will be selfless in serving others

If my neighbor is a Muslim, I'll still invite him over for a barbecue. Maybe we'll be able to talk about Jesus. Maybe I'll be able to invite him

to church. Even though I might want to barbecue pork chops, I will NOT because Muslims think that it's evil to eat any pork. That would obviously cause a problem. If he happens to be a Bears fan, though, I'll still wear my Lions shirt and we'll tease each other. That does not involve faith. But the pork chops would trouble his conscience so I'll forgo that. After all, his faith is at stake.

If a mother prefers to come to the early service at church, but she knows that the only way she'll get her teenage son to church is to drive him to the later service, she'll give up what she wants and go the later service. After all, his faith is at stake.

If my cousin is a recovering alcoholic, I'm not going to offer him spiked eggnog when he visits at Christmas. Nor am I going to drink any alcohol in front of him. I would not want to do anything that would lead him back to the sin of abusing alcohol. After all, his faith is at stake.

I could go on with dozens of examples but you get the point. As you go through your daily life, may the Holy Spirit always keep you aware of what you can do to demonstrate spiritual concern for others. Christian love that has been touched and motivated by Jesus' love will be careful not to do something to harm someone's faith. Christian love will even gladly give away its right to do something if faith is at stake. Think of it this way. In heaven, we'll enjoy every happiness forever. Everything will always go our way. So what if we give up some things we want while on this earth? As Christians, we have an awesome privilege to represent Jesus on this earth. We get to be his face and hands and voice to tell others about salvation. Awesome! We have meaning and purpose in life far beyond just earning money so we can pay our bills and maybe enjoy ourselves. So, how do we love when faith is at stake? Filled up with Christ's love, we do whatever we can, even giving up some of our precious rights, to help others connect to Jesus. Amen.