

*The 'Sine Qua Non' of the Life of Faith*  
Psalm 71:1-7; I Corinthians 13

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By Dr. David B. Freeman, Pastor  
Weatherly Heights Baptist Church

“Thou shalt be civil.”

That’s what a group of religious leaders in New Orleans is saying to their parishioners and to anyone else who will listen. About two dozen Christian, Jewish, and Muslim clergy there recently came together to find common ground. Now this is their mantra: be civil. Show basic respect to others, even to those with whom you disagree.

This interfaith group of clergy agreed that all human beings are God’s children, all of us, and that an offense against one’s neighbor is an offense against God. “Violence begets violence,” they said, “in speech and in action.”

So what they’re asking people down in New Orleans to do is debate the important issues. Don’t sweep them under the carpet or shrink from much needed public discourse. Debate the issues; just don’t demonize your opponents. Put all the issues on the table, but don’t misrepresent your opponents’ viewpoints. Be honest, fair and respectful. And this may be their most significant request. They asked for an end to all the email messages that deliberately demonize and humiliate other people or groups.

A Methodist clergywoman who participated in this effort said that she went to a raucous town hall meeting on health-care reform sponsored by one of Louisiana’s senators. “To say that they were a bunch of wing nuts would be absolutely inaccurate,” she said. “They’re the people who go to church, who mow each others’ lawns when they’re sick, who bring a pot of soup over.” I think she is right, and then something happens when people gather at these meetings to discuss a hot issue. We’ve seen it in our own city. So this group in New Orleans has issued a call to civility. And they say that it’s not just about being polite. It’s about being people of faith and living out the expectations of our faith (*Christian Century*, January 26, 2010, p. 15).

When I read this, it occurred to me that they're doing in New Orleans exactly what the Apostle Paul did in the city of Corinth. The church in Corinth was a congregation in serious conflict. One faction in the church claimed allegiance to Paul. Another faction claimed allegiance to a leader named Apollos, and another faction to Peter. Yet another faction in the church, probably with their noses held high, claimed allegiance only to Christ. Then there was additional conflict over the gifts of the Spirit. Some claimed that the gift of tongues, speaking in tongues, was superior to all other gifts. Others who had the gifts of wisdom or knowledge or faith of course begged to differ with them. Paul tried to calm all this froth by comparing the church to a human body. Our bodies need all their parts to be whole. They need eyes, hands, and feet. No body part should say to the others, "I don't need you." Likewise, Paul says, the church needs all the different gifts, all the different people, to make it whole.

Finally, Paul gets to chapter thirteen, one of the most beloved in all the New Testament, where he describes "a still more excellent way." What is it? What is the more excellent way? It is the way of love, which Paul describes as the *sine qua non* (sin-ih-kwah-NON) of the life of faith. *Sine qua non* is a Latin phrase that is translated literally as "without which not," which doesn't make much sense in English. It is a phrase used to describe what is absolutely necessary, what is essential, indispensable. For Paul, the *sine qua non* of the Christian life is not faith, and it is not hope, as important as they both are. It is love. It is the way we relate to each other. What Paul is describing here has nothing to do with romantic feelings. It is not about feelings at all. *Agape* is about actions that seek the good of another, regardless of how we feel. And for people of faith, that is absolutely necessary. That is what is essential and indispensable.

The first thing Paul does in this "love chapter" is explains the power of love. Without it, without *agape*, Paul says that our greatest human efforts, regardless of how extraordinary, are worthless, nothing. So, Paul says, you can speak in tongues, even with the tongues of mortals and of angels. That's great, but if you do it without love, you're speaking in tongues is nothing more than a grating, irritating racket. That's the power of love. And you others have the gifts of prophesy. That's great. Knowledge. Congratulations. Some of you claim to have so much faith that you can move mountains. Oh, how impressive! And some of you even claim that you would give away all your possessions, even your bodies. That's

amazing! But if you do any of these without love, Paul says that they are worthless, nothing. That is the power of love.

It's kind of like the cake bake at a snooty, downtown church. This cake bake was a big affair. All the best cooks in the church entered their cakes every year. The church had a new member this year, and she really wanted to be accepted by her new church and friends. So she baked a cake. However, she didn't give herself quite enough time. She was trying to get ready for work and help her son pack for a scouting trip. When she took the cake out of the oven, it imploded, just caved in upon itself. It looked awful. And she didn't have enough time to bake another one. So being the clever woman that she was, she decided to scoop out the center of the cake. She took a roll of toilet tissue and placed it there in the center. When she spread the icing on it, no one could tell what she had done. It was beautiful. No, it was perfect.

She woke her daughter, gave her some money, and told her to go to the bake sale at church and bid on her cake. It didn't matter what it cost. Her daughter had to buy that cake. Then no one would ever know.

Well, like I said, this was a pretty snooty church, and this was a big event. When the daughter got to the bake sale, the snootiest woman in the church had just bought the cake. This was terrible. Nothing worse could have happened.

Except this. The next day she had to attend a luncheon at the snooty woman's house. All the upper crust would be there. As humiliating as it would be, she decided that she had to confess everything. The luncheon was elegant, the food delicious. Everything was perfect. Until desert. Her cake, uncut, was brought out for desert. Everyone oohed and ahed about how beautiful the cake was. It was perfect, they said. And the poor woman watched all this, horrified. Just before she rose to her feet to confess all, the mayor's wife, a prominent member of the church, declared, "That is the most beautiful cake I've ever seen." The hostess, the snootiest of all, not aware of who baked the cake, said to the mayor's wife, "Why, thank you, dear. I baked it myself."

Paul was right. If we do not have love, we are nothing.

The second thing Paul does is describes the characteristics of love. Listen to this. Love is patient, he says. Think of these in relation to the people around you, especially the people with whom you may differ. Love is patient with these people. It is kind. It is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. Now, let's be honest. This is not easy, is it? He continues. Love does not insist on its own way. It is not irritable or resentful. It does not rejoice in wrongdoing. Instead it rejoices in the truth. You know what he is describing here? Paul is describing a person whose life has been transformed by the power of God's grace. Here are the last four characteristics of love: it bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, and endures all things.

You know where you hear this read most often, don't you? Weddings. I read it at weddings too, and it is appropriate. However, this is not about weddings or marriage only. This is about relationships in general, how Christian men and women are to relate to anyone. Love doesn't keep track of wrongs. It keeps on loving and loving and loving. That is characteristic of love.

Finally Paul describes why love is the *sine qua non* of the life of faith. Love is absolutely necessary because love never ends. Love issues from the very essence of God, who *is* love. God does not need to have faith. God does not need to hope. God *is* love, and when we love, we participate with God in an action that is essentially God. "Faith, hope and love abide," Paul says, "and the greatest of these is love." It is the *sine qua non* of the life of faith.

So Paul's word to the people in Corinth is a good word for us today too. Let us put away childish behavior, and let us be adults, adults whose lives have been transformed by God's grace. In our public dealings, in our interactions with our neighbors, clerk at the grocery store, the teller at the bank, the young person who waits our table, in all these dealings, let us be civil. In our interactions with people from different political parties, theological leanings, and philosophical persuasions, let us demonstrate a love that is patient and kind, not jealous or boastful. It's not just about being polite. It is about being people of faith and living out of the expectations of our faith. Besides, that is how God has related to us.

Closing Prayer

Lord, we know that you have shown your love for in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us. Help us now, we who have been touched by the grace of our Lord, to love others. And may our love of others bring glory to you. Amen.