

The Book of Corinthians is believed to have been written by the Apostle Paul, probably during his stay in Ephesus, (53–57 ce) after his initial 18 month sojourn in Corinth (around 50 ce). Paul seems to have written this letter of pastoral advice after he received disconcerting news of the community in Corinth regarding jealousies, rivalry, and immoral behavior. In our day and age we most often hear this scripture read at weddings to describe marital love, but in reality the text is part of the letter, embedded in a section talking about diversity and unity within the church according to spiritual gifts and how they are used in worship. Paul circles back to earlier arguments and vocabulary to alert the reader that love is the opposite of the divisive rivalry that he has painfully seen in the church of Corinth. Paul implies that everything about the behavior of the Corinthians, in particular in worship, contradicts the character of love. Paul moves to an argument that points to their error as being focused on above and below. They see only heaven and the spiritual realm, how they are already tasting God’s power, like God; Paul insists upon their growth and spiritual maturation, (what we call sanctification), that God’s power is not just to be attained outside of the world, but we are to join in to God’s mission of justice, common good and love here and now. Paul’s writing is so beautiful that some have theorized that it was an ancient poem from Greek literature that Paul repurposes, but the tightness with which its written, the ways in which it so clearly points to earlier and later arguments in his letter demonstrates that Paul clearly was the author of this soaring rhetoric that serves as a literary climax.

noisy gong the literal translation is actually [something made of bronze that makes noise]. **gong** χαλκός chalkos| copper or bronze, something made of bronze such as money; or possibly a brazen musical instrument, **noisy**: ἤχων ēchōn | to (make a) sound; used of the roaring of the sea in Luke 21:25. We know that in antiquity the city of Corinth was famous as a place of production of bronze. It’s thus a nice metaphor for self-centered, noisy forms of worship and a local reality.

PROPHETIC we see the way in which Paul is talking about worship and this poem is part of his overall argument. He also talks about PROPHECY in 1 Corinthians 12: 4-10;

“⁴ Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; ⁵ and there are varieties of services, but the same Lord; ⁶ and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone. ⁷ To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good. ⁸ To one is given through the Spirit the utterance of wisdom, ..¹⁰ to another the working of miracles, to another PROPHECY, ...”

and 1 Corinthians 14 (most of the chapter)...

“¹Pursue love and strive for the spiritual gifts, and especially that you may PROPHECY. ...”

LOVE In the Greek language there are 3 words to describe the vastness of love: 1) agape: which Paul uses as exhorts church members to practice as an imitation of the way in which God loves us in Jesus, and Jesus loved other people. It’s a patient and costly service to others. 2) Philios which is a brotherly sort of love (like Philadelphia – the city of brotherly love); and 3) eros – passionate love, as is most experienced in sexual attraction (think of the word erotica). Paul sums up his advice in 1 Corinthians 16:13-14 saying “¹³ Keep alert, stand firm in your faith, be courageous, be strong. ¹⁴ Let all that you do be done in love [agape].”

May 17, 2020

1 Corinthians

12:31-13:13

New Revised Standard Version
(NRSV)

³¹ But strive for the greater gifts. And I will show you a still more excellent way.

¹ 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. ² And if I have PROPHECIC 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. ³ 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.

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

⁸ Love 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. ⁹ For we know only in part, and we prophesy only in part; ¹⁰ but when the complete comes, the partial will come to an end. ¹¹ 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. ¹² For 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. ¹³ And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love.

QUESTIONS FOR THE PRACTICE OF EXAMEN & CONTEMPLATION

- What part of today's texts grab you?
- What is your favorite part? Why?
- How have you been hurt or hurt others in the work of the church that has been done without love (even if undoubtedly well-intentioned)?
- We all know and want love, what is it that keeps us from living into it and paying it forward?
- How have you experienced this 1 Corinthian 13-type-of-love in your live and spiritual journey? Where? How did it impact, shape or motivate you?
- A pandemic is necessarily a time of fear, when fear challenges our hope and faith – in God and each other. How does love fit into that? How have you experienced agape-love – or given agape-love in these past weeks that has invited and pulled you past the smallness and world-reducing-power of fear?
- How do you hear the the Spirit of God inviting you to act, speak or be in your relationships through this word?

Paul also writes a soaring poetry about love in Romans 8, which concludes with:

³⁸ For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, ³⁹ nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the **LOVE** of God in Christ Jesus our Lord."

How does that scripture speak to you and what we're living today?

ENVIOUS ζηλοῖ zēloi | to be jealous, envious, of a person or a possession/thing. It's the same word used when Paul corrects the church members on their divisiveness in 1 Corinthians 3:1-3 – ¹And so, brothers and sisters, I could not speak to you as spiritual people, but rather as people of the flesh, as infants in Christ. ² I fed you with milk, not solid food, for you were not ready for solid food. Even now you are still not ready, ³ for you are still of the flesh. For as long as there is **JEALOUSY** (ζηλοῖ) and quarreling among you, are you not of the flesh, and behaving according to human inclinations?

boastful περπερεύεται perpereuetai | to act as a braggart, i.e. a "show off" who needs too much attention. It's the same word used when Paul corrects the church members on their arrogance in terms of thinking that some among them are more "spiritual" than others in 1 Corinthians 1:27-31

<<²⁷ But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; ²⁸ God chose what is low and despised in the world, things that are not, to reduce to nothing things that are, ²⁹ **so that no one might boast in the presence of God.** ³⁰ He is the source of your life in Christ Jesus, who became for us wisdom from God, and righteousness and sanctification and redemption, ³¹ in order that, as it is written, **"Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord."**>>

and 1 Corinthians 3:21 ²¹ So let no one **boast** about human leaders. For all things are yours"

and 1 Corinthians 5:6 ⁶ Your **boasting** is not a good thing. Do you not know that a little yeast leavens the whole batch of dough?:

Arrogant φυσιοῦται physioutai | to puff or blow up, to be inflated, arrogant or proud (full of hot air). It's the same word used by all in his corrections in 1 Corinthians 4: 6-7 & 18-21:

⁶ I have applied all this to Apollos and myself for your benefit, brothers and sisters, so that you may learn through us the meaning of the saying, "Nothing beyond what is written," so that none of you will be *puffed up* in favor of one against another. ⁷ For who sees anything different in you? What do you have that you did not receive? And if you received it, why do you boast as if it were not a gift?

¹⁸ But some of you, thinking that I am not coming to you, have become *arrogant*. ¹⁹ But I will come to you soon, if the Lord wills, and I will find out not the talk of these *arrogant* people but their power. ²⁰ For the kingdom of God depends not on talk but on power. ²¹ What would you prefer? Am I to come to you with a stick, or with love in a spirit of gentleness?

DUDE ἀσχημονεῖ aschēmonei | to act improperly