

“Why do we do what we do?”

May the grace and peace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you.

Some of the best guidance that I have received came from a very unique sort of person. He was a somewhat famous professor at the university that I was attending, but he wasn't famous for reasons that you might suspect. Students found his classes to be confusing and complicated. When the class finished, the white board looked as though a group of toddlers had been given free rein to draw and color. There were no guiding text books, no handouts, just weekly lectures on topics that often seemed unrelated to each other. One week we would discuss medical science and the next week we might be talking about the best apple crisp in New York. You never really knew what was going to be taught, but the professor assured us that each topic could easily be connected to the title of the course, which was: “Introduction to Religious Studies.”

To add to the madness of it all, the professor had a rule that feedback and grades would only be provided to students who picked up their assignments from a box in his office. As you might imagine, very few students made an effort to do this, partially because they were afraid of him but mostly because it was tradition that everyone would receive an A grade. So, I don't blame them for not bothering to go. But as for me, I've never been one to go with the crowd and I genuinely hoped that written feedback might help me better understand the content of the course, so despite the advice of my peers, I dropped by the professors office.

He greeted me by saying: “Ah Mr. Bruce, come in, grab a hat and sit down.” He pointed to a stack of tinfoil hats on the corner of his desk and motioned me to take one. We each grabbed one and while putting it on his head, he said “aren't you going to wear yours?” My options seemed pretty limited, so I unfolded it and placed the ridiculous thing on my head. “That will keep the government from listening as we work” he explained. He then proceeded to ask me if I would like a drink of Kool-Aid. Sure enough, in the corner of his office where one might keep whiskey or rye, he flipped up two shot glasses, pulled the stopper out of the glass bottle, and poured us each a generous shot of red Kool-Aid. “Are you here for your paper?” he asked. I explained that I was and that I hoped his feedback would help me better understand the content of his lectures. He reached over, grabbed my assignment and threw it in the garbage, saying: “if you want to understand the course, we need to get rid of garbage like this.” He went on to explain that his method of teaching had nothing to do with papers or assignments, but that he hoped to inspire students to ask questions, to see what they might be curious about, to help them find who they are and what their place might be within the world. He said his focus was on self-discovery and personal development – things that he believed the government did not want him to teach, hence the foil hats.

After giving this short explanation, he made sure his hat was on tight, looked me in the eyes and said: “you will know when you truly learn something because it changes who you are. It changes how you do things, but most importantly, it changes why you do things.” And that was the basis of the course, it wasn't about learning the academics of religion – it was about understanding who we are, what we believe, and why we do the things that we do.

I think of this professor and his profound wisdom every time that I read Paul's letter to the Corinthians because the people of the church in Corinth were much like the students in my university class. Literary evidence

suggests that they wrote to Paul, asking about the rules and legalities of being Christian. From Paul's responses in 1 Corinthians, it is clear that the believers in Corinth were wondering about the proper usage of spiritual gifts, the rules of Christian marriage, and what they needed to do to uphold their status as followers of Christ. Paul, of course, responds to each of their concerns, but then challenges them with the words of today's text:

"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 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.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."

(1 Cor. 13: 1-3)

Much like my eccentric university teacher, Paul is reminding the believers in Corinth about the importance of why they are called to do the things that they are asking about. It isn't about jumping through hoops or checking off all of the right boxes. People can do all of the right things for the wrong reasons and that is what Paul is trying to explain. Acts of Christian stewardship are important, but why we act is equally, if not more, important. And so, alongside of Paul and my university professor, I ask: why do we do the things that we do? Why do we join here in worship? Why do we sing? Why do we pray? Why do we give gifts of finances and time? Why do we do the many things that we do?

As Paul explains, the answer should be love. But, I wonder if we sometimes lose sight of the love that Paul is talking about or if we get caught in patterns of tradition and forget that the Christian journey is most fundamentally rooted in love? And not the romantic love that this passage of scripture is often used in reference to, but *agape*, the word for love that the Greeks used specifically in reference to God's love.

The Christian journey is about the gospel message of God's love. Martin Luther said that Christianity is motivated by faith that is active in love. It's about responding to and being a part of God's love that is given to us through the gift of Jesus Christ. It is about being a part of and sharing God's love. A love that is patient, a love that is kind, a love that is forgiving, a love that is not arrogant, rude, or resentful, a love that endures, and a love that never ends. A love that Paul says is so expansive and perfect that the human mind cannot fully comprehend it.

The gospel message of God's love through Christ is why we can do what we do. We can love because Christ first loved us. We are called to worship and serve because of God who loves us. The Christian journey is rooted from beginning to end in the hope of God's perfect love.

The lectionary cuts today's reading somewhat short and leaves out two of the most powerful words amidst what Paul is writing. The following verse begins with two simple words: pursue love. Pursue love. The message at the heart of Paul's text and perhaps at the heart of the Christian call to action is to pursue love – to love one another in the way that God loves us. Because the love of God changes people and inspires hope. God's love changed Paul on the road to Damascus just as much as love changed the direction of my life. Love is transformative, love sets people free, and love is what the gospel calls believers to share. The beauty of God's love is that it can be shared through both Word and action, through moments of understanding, compassion, forgiveness, and humility – so that all might come to see and to know the transformative power of God's love, both within this place and throughout the entirety of the world. Love made way for our salvation. Love looks beyond our faults and sees our needs. Love sustains us through the gifts of the sacraments. Love is what brings us together as believers in Christ to worship, to sing, to rejoice, to give, and to pray.

We have the freedom to celebrate because of the compassionate embrace of God's love that is extended to us through the gift of Jesus Christ.

And so, may God who is rich in love and mercy direct our paths and aid us in a pursuit to share his perfect love with and for all people. That all might come to see and to know the hope that is ours through Jesus Christ. That we might somehow be used as stewards of his mercy, love, grace, and compassion. That the hope of the gospel message might be seen and heard as a tangible reality for all people. For God loves all with a love that is patient and a love is kind. God's love is not envious or boastful, nor is it arrogant or rude. It's not irritable or resentful, and it rejoices in truth, believes in all things, hopes all things, and endures all things. God's love is perfect. God's love is with us. His love is for us, and it is a love that never ends. Amen.