

Series: On Purpose

January 29, 2017

Title: A Better Way

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Text: 1 Corinthians 12:31b-13:7

Echo Chamber?

A visit to the theater:

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A tall, multi-storied structure stood just northwest of Corinth's central forum or "agora." Like the stately temples in the city center, it was the pride of the city: a massive amphitheater that could seat 15,000.

The Greeks had been building such amphitheaters for many hundreds of years. They had perfected the acoustics, from the design of the stage to the sloping semi-circle that rose above the orchestra. To this day, a person standing in the center of the amphitheater can be heard clearly from every one of the thousands of seats above and around him.

And yet the Greeks had one more trick up their sleeves when it came to the acoustics of their beloved amphitheaters. The ancient Roman architect Vitruvius wrote a long treatise on the acoustics of theaters. Included in this treatise is the description of a "sound system" which amplified the sounds coming from the stage! The sound system was made up of brass urns that were tuned to resonate to specific notes or frequencies. These were then carefully placed around the amphitheater. When an actor spoke, they reverberated to the sound of the actor's voice, amplifying it so that it was more clearly heard by the thousands of people in the audience.

He explained:

On this principle of arrangement, the voice, uttered from the stage as from a centre, and spreading and striking against the cavities of the different vessels, as it comes in contact with them, will be increased in clearness of sound, and will wake an harmonious note in unison with itself.

The role of these brass urns or resonators was to capture the voice of the actor far below and then amplify it so that the actor could be heard more

clearly. Their mission was to take a faint sound and make it louder. They had no message of their own.

Echoing Brass:

It was with these brass urns – this ancient sound system – in mind that Paul begins his most famous chapter:

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1 Corinthians 13:1 NIV [amended]

If I speak in the tongues of men or of angels, but do not have love, I am only an echoing brass or a clanging cymbal.

Paul has written at length about the gifts of the Holy Spirit operating in the lives of Christians. But now comes a warning: a gift like speaking in a heavenly language is only of value when done in love. Without God's love being present, the message from God is lost. The brass urn is simply humming its own sound – drawing attention to itself and failing to capture and amplify the voice of the world's Creator.

Echo Chamber?

Paul goes on to touch on other wonderful, supernatural gifts from the Holy Spirit. His point is the same: if love is not present, the giftings are in vain:

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1 Corinthians 13:2-3 NIV

If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have faith that can move mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing.

If I give all I possess to the poor and give over my body to hardship that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing.

Take love out of the equation, and even the most wonderful gifts of heaven become nothing: "I am nothing," "I gain nothing."

We were placed in the vast amphitheater of this world to amplify One Voice alone: the Voice of the one true God. He has chosen to speak through us. He has created us to resonate with His words and thoughts. But if we

disconnect ourselves from Him and become self-focused, we become nothing more than the noisy cacophony of this world. It doesn't matter how much we know, how much faith we have, how generous we are or how much we sacrifice. What matters is that we are filled and animated by God's love.

Love

What love sounds like:

So what does Love sound like when it is amplified by us into the vast amphitheater of this world? Paul writes:

[Slide 5]

1 Corinthians 13:4a NIV

Love is patient, love is kind.

Confronted with the ruin and brokenness of His precious Creation, God is first of all patient and kind. This is what Love looks like and sounds like. God holds back His judgment and reaches out with infinite Love to rescue and restore people made in His image.

Patience and kindness are in short supply today – evidence of a broken world. God calls us to be in the amphitheater, but to refuse to echo the voices of discord and hate. Instead, we are called, in a thousand ways, to echo His patience and kindness into every conversation and into every act.

That is what Love sounds like.

What love does not sound like:

How easy for sound systems to make noises they aren't supposed to! Think about feedback, the pops and crackles that come with loose connections, or speakers that muffle and garble the sounds they are supposed to reproduce.

Paul lists a whole array of things which people do that do not sound like the Love of God coming into our world:

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1 Corinthians 13:4b-6 NIV

- *It does not envy,*

- *it does not boast,*
- *it is not proud.*
- *It does not dishonor others,*
- *it is not self-seeking,*
- *it is not easily angered,*
- *it keeps no record of wrongs.*
- *Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth.*

First items in this list address various ways in which we are tempted toward *self-love* and *self-promotion*. The word translated “envy” refers to a spirit of rivalry or partisanship – “us versus them.” Boasting, pride, shaming others and seeking one’s own gain are other ways in which we make ourselves the main event – the actor on the stage – instead of honoring the God who made us.

Paul goes on to include anger, score-keeping and delighting in evil.

- Anger is a normal human emotion. But left to itself, it will destroy even the best of worlds.
- How tempting to keep score when someone wrongs us. You know the old saying: “I don’t get mad; I get even.” It’s amazing how well our “righteousness” memories can hang on to an old injustice!
- How tempting it can be to wish that something bad will happen to those we dislike. The Germans call it “schadenfreude”: “a feeling of enjoyment that comes from seeing or hearing about the troubles of other people.”

Paul reminds us that God never sounds like these things. Every day Satan will try to hijack you and have you amplify self-interest and outrage, shaming of others and the celebration of evil. Often, the temptation will come precisely in moral terms: outrage at some injustice or the desire to get even for some past wrong.

But that is not how God operates. Love doesn’t speak that language.

Love in action:

Paul draws us back to the stage where we see God and His Love in action.

[Slide 7]

1 Corinthians 13:7 NIV

It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres.

This is what Love is and what Love does. This is what God looks like and sounds like.

Jesus stood on the stage one day and told a story of a father whose younger son listened to the tempting voices of this broken world. The young man demanded that his father give him his inheritance – thus in effect, writing his father off as dead. Filled with arrogance and self-importance, he went off and wasted his fortune. One day he found himself at the bottom, feeding pigs.

But all along, his father watched and waited for his return. His father never stopped protecting, trusting, hoping and persevering. So when the young man did come home, his father was waiting for him with open arms. No “I told you so!” No anger or shaming. No list of wrongs to be made right. Just: “I love you!”

That’s what Love does.

A Better Way

The Church of Saint Anne, Jerusalem:

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An ancient church stands in the northeast corner of the Old City of Jerusalem, not far from the Lion’s Gate. It is called The Church of Saint Anne. It was built in 1138 and, like most medieval churches, forms the shape of a cross. A dome covers the place where the two parts of the cross intersect. And this dome gives the church its amazing acoustics. Like the echoing brass urns of the ancient Greek theaters, the dome takes the sounds of songs or chants and echoes them back to the congregation.

I remember gathering with fellow pastors under that dome one morning. Our tour leader encouraged us to sing “in the Spirit.” So we lifted our voices, and when we did so, our impromptu songs we caught in that dome and reflected back to us like a choir from heaven!

The architect who designed the Church of Saint Anne figured out a way to amplify the human voice to give glory and honor to God.

A Better Way:

That ancient church pictures for us what God means for us to be: His sound system, amplifying His voice into this world. When we do, the prodigals will hear not us, but the voice of the Father who created them and who always protects, always trusts, always hopes and always perseveres.

LIFE Group Lesson for "A Better Way"

Ice Breaker:

- Tell us about an act of love that you experienced this past week. What made it so special?

God *is* love:

- John writes:
 - *1 John 4:7-8 NIV*
 - *Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love.*
- What do we learn about love in this little passage?
 - Where love originates.
 - The true mark of the Christian.
 - The definition of God Himself!
- John continues:
 - *1 John 4:9-10 NIV*
 - *This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him.*
 - *This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins.*
- John is obviously talking about a very specific and special kind of love. What is unique about *this* love?
 - It is an act of God's giving of Himself to us.
 - It is sacrificial – despite the fact that we are unworthy.
- Finally, John comes back to the command he gave at the beginning of this text:
 - *1 John 4:11-12 NIV*
 - *Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. No one has ever seen God; but if we love one another, God lives in us and his love is made complete in us.*
- This extraordinary love – this love that originates in heaven – "is made complete in us."
 - Imagine: God's love needs a place to "land" and become visible.
 - God's love can only be fully Love if it touches the beloved.
 - You and I are privileged to be the ones who complete Love's journey into this world.

Share and Pray:

- Is there a place in your life where you need more of God's love to grow?
- Pray for one another to be "Love perfecters."