

REACHING THE TOP

1 Corinthians 13: 1-13

What's the top you want to reach? What's the top you hope your children or grandchildren will reach? Well, our society has very clear ideas about what the top looks like. It's all about money, status, position, influence and victory. Whatever field of study, profession, art, sport or connections in life, whatever schools we send our children to, whatever activities we encourage them to pursue, whatever neighbourhood we aspire to live in, whatever house or car we own, however attractive we make ourselves, whoever are friends or family are, whatever club or organization we belong to... We live in a society of intense competition and jockeying for position in one form or another. Whether we feel we're doing quite well in such a world or whether we feel deficient in such a world, or whether we find it an oppressive tyranny we need to escape from in some way, the top is very clearly defined it seems.

The question is, what do we have to do to get there? How much time, focus and attention must we devote to climbing and reaching the top? What must we do and who must we get close to? What are we willing to do and who are we willing to use or climb over to get there? How many resources do we need, how much money and what kind of friends? And what do we have to do to deal with our deficiencies so that we get it right and start climbing or climbing again?

One of the best books I've read in the last 10 years is called: "The Road to Character" by best selling author: David Brooks. Here's how he opens the book: "Recently I've been thinking about the difference between the resume virtues and the eulogy virtues. The resume virtues are the ones you list on your resume, the skills that you bring to the job market and that contribute to external success. The eulogy virtues are deeper. They're the virtues that get talked about at your funeral, the ones that exist at the core of your being – whether you are kind, brave, honest or faithful; what kind of relationships you formed.

Most of us would say that the eulogy virtues are more important than the resume virtues, but I confess that for long stretches of my life I've spent more time thinking about the latter than the former. Our education system is certainly oriented around the resume virtues more than the eulogy ones. Public conversation is, too – the self-help tips in magazines, the nonfiction bestsellers. Most of us have clearer strategies for how to achieve career success than we do how to develop profound character."

Brooks goes on to refer to a book written many decades ago which distinguishes two kinds of people or, as Brooks describes it: two sides of our human nature. There is Adam 1 and Adam 2. "Adam 1 is the career-oriented, ambitious side of our nature. Adam 1 is the external,

resume Adam. Adam 1 wants to build, create, produce and discover things. He wants to have high status and win victories.

Adam 2 is the internal Adam. Adam 2 wants to embody certain moral qualities. Adam 2 wants to have a serene inner character, a quiet but solid sense of right and wrong – not only to do good, but to be good. Adam 2 wants to love intimately, to sacrifice self in the service of others, to live in obedience to some transcendent truth, to have a cohesive inner soul that honours creation and one's own possibilities.

While Adam 1 wants to conquer the world, Adam 2 wants to obey a calling to serve the world. While Adam 1 is creative and savours his own accomplishments, Adam 2 sometimes renounces worldly success and status for the sake of some sacred purpose... While Adam 1's motto is "Success," Adam 2 experiences life as a moral drama. His motto is "Charity, love, and redemption.""

As already noted, Brooks confesses that even though he aspires to grow into Adam 2 more fully, much of his life has been devoted to Adam 1 pursuits. He also believes, once again, that an Adam 1 understanding of success is what our society teaches our children to pursue because this is also what we want for them too. Our children and grandchildren reflect us. Their success is also our success.

But success, unfortunately, often lacks a moral compass. What top are we reaching for and what are we giving up or discarding to get there? The great Christian mystic and activist Simone Weil, who lived and died through her struggle as a French Jew during the second world war, wrote an essay at the time as she witnessed the meteoric rise of Hitler. She observed how even those who were most critical of Hitler also secretly admired him because of how skillful he was in rising to power. Regardless of the cruelty he was unleashing, the lies and misinformation he was successfully peddling, and the democratic systems of governance and law he was dismantling, people admired his aggressive assertiveness and boldness in reaching the top and dealing with his competitors. Power is attractive and people admire it. By supporting powerful people we hope their success will rub off on us too in some way. Think about what's happening in our world today.

Well, this way of measuring the top and aspiring to the top was very much the same in the ancient world too. It was a very different world, yes. But power, influence, money, status, success in competition... that's what life was about. And whether you were born with privilege and wealth or impoverished and enslaved, you still aimed to climb to a higher, better station in life. Whatever your profession, institution, culture or religion, there was always a ladder to climb and a neighbour to compete against. Sure you could help each other out, but everyone also had to look out for themselves and their own above all else.

Well, it was into this very world that the apostle Paul, a follower of Jesus, is teaching a whole other understanding of the top and how to get there. The church community in Corinth reflected the world around them. There were diversities in culture and status reflected in the congregation. There was also competition. What does this look like in a church? It's about who is more spiritual than who, who is more to be admired, followed, even revered. Who has special spiritual gifts? Who has a following? The congregation was divided with different cliques vying for power and authority. You'd think they'd know better as followers of Jesus, but we get the very same issue in the gospel accounts between Jesus' disciples. We're told they argue about who is greater, who is closer to Jesus and who should have the top spots beside Jesus when he establishes his kingdom which is God's kingdom.

But what kind of kingdom is God's kingdom as Jesus teaches and embodies it? What kind of victory is that of a crucified messiah? Crucifixion is reserved for slaves and rebels. It's a publicly humiliating demonstration of failure and defeat. Why would Paul and early Christian leaders hold up the symbol of the cross as a measure of a different standard for getting to a different top?

Well, it's all about love. Jesus' victory is witnessing and embodying what God's love is and how it responds in a world where power, status, wealth and bullying military and economic violence rule. And love is what Paul is thrusting at the Corinthians in the face of how they have been drawn in by the world's measure of the top. You want to reach for the top, Paul is saying? You've got it all wrong. Here's the real top and how to get there! And with that, he offers a most beautiful passage of scripture that is probably the most popular of all. And yet, popularity doesn't mean understanding or impactful change.

And to really understand the words and the message in a way that is as real for us here and now in 2025 as it was for those first hearers of the reading in the 1st century, let me rephrase the passage with my own paraphrase translation:

You can have all the knowledge, power, status and money in the world, but if you don't have love, you have nothing... You can have all the abilities, make all the sacrifices and win the greatest victories in the world, but if you don't have love, you have nothing.

So what is love? Love is patient with others. Love is kind to others. One who loves truly does not act toward another out of envy. One who loves does not brag about how smart or great they are making others feel inferior or inadequate. One who loves honours others and tries to respect them in how they speak to them and acknowledge them. One who loves does not rejoice when they win if winning also means cheating or wronging or humiliating someone or making them feel small to do so. Rather they rejoice only in what is true even if it is difficult to accept and admit. One who loves can absorb and endure hardships better because they build

up in themselves faith and hope in the possibilities of love creating relationships of reciprocity in caring and supporting one another.

Love is limitless and inexhaustible. It fills to overflowing and enriches beyond any material wealth. It grows ever deeper too, cultivating solid roots in any heart that keeps opening to it.

As for knowledge and the power that comes from knowledge... at the end of life it will no longer matter. Knowledge is a passing thing because ever new knowledge corrects and surpasses what has already been known or rediscovers ancient wisdom it has forgotten. Also passing is power, influence, money and all that. It's value dies with the person. Or you can leave some of it behind for those after you, but what of your heart and soul? What is your legacy that way? What have you cultivated? What have you worked at, sacrificed, applied yourself to seek that is enduring forever beyond physical monuments and bank accounts?

You can remain a child or you can choose to grow up. You can get stuck in a me-myself-and I universe or cultivate childlike wonder, gratitude, grace, humility and all those wonderful virtues that are nourished and grown by love. Wisdom is in the growing up of love and the purging in ourselves of the childish egotistical narcissist.

The mystery is that we don't need to know everything about love and we don't need to understand it all to know it, feel it and live it. We trust in love and hope in love even when love feels weak and ineffective in the face of bullying forcefulness imposing itself. And yet, love will win because it has eternity on its side. It is the deepest truth of who we are and the beating heart of our universe. We will find fulfillment and rest in love eternally even as the world will keep turning and churning...

OK. I've definitely gone on a bit. But I dare anyone reading this chapter in its context to tell me anything I've said here is not what the apostle Paul illumined by the revelation of Christ-love is saying.

We all have to negotiate our needs and our fears in life. We all have to provide for those we care about, maybe make a difference and maybe even make our mark in some way. But if it's anything other than love we're aiming for, do we need to rethink where our hearts, our passions and our efforts are directed?

"And now faith, hope and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love." Amen.