

We Need to Talk About Bruno
1 Corinthians 13:1-13
Sermon by Rev. J. Michael Cobb
Fourth Sunday after Epiphany
Woodbury UMC
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Today's lectionary text is among the most famous in the whole Bible, because it gets used in an awful lot of weddings. This is fine, because it is all about love. If you zoom out a little, however, you will see that this famous discourse comes as part of a much larger discussion about spiritual gifts.

This is our third week looking at spiritual gifts, and third week of texts that continue what began the prior week. We started with the first half of 1 Corinthians 12: Spiritual gifts are from God, and they come in a wide variety. Last week we discussed that spiritual gifts and even the church itself are diverse and interdependent on one another, and then we ended right in the middle of a verse. The reading ended with Paul's urging to strive after the greater gifts, offering his confident assurance, And yet I will show you the most excellent way.

Most excellent is quite the bold statement! If you are even better than excellent, to the point of being Most Excellent, that sounds like perfection. And we Methodists believe that in our Christian life, we are moving on to perfection, so this is a very Methodist way of thinking. Then he gets to this famous text, about how love is what gives everything else meaning and power — and how all the skill you possess goes from being most excellent to worthless or annoying if it is not animated by love.

That is the essence of what I have to say to you today. I've got more to share, but it all is in support of that one point. Even if you have tremendous spiritual gifts, but lack a grounding in love, what you are left with, in Paul's words, is a clanging cymbal. If you have monumental gifts, but lack love, in Paul's words you are nothing and you gain nothing. You all have some measure of giftedness, given to you by God, and so now your job is to strive after love in all things that you do.

So let's recap. All have been given special gifts. These gifts are meant to be used not for selfish purposes, but for the good of the body. And these gifts are meaningless if they are not grounded fully and firmly in love.

If you just look at it in those simplest terms, you may find that this looks quite a bit like the setting of the Disney movie Encanto.

If you haven't seen it, it is playing on Disney Plus, and gets my highest recommendation. It centers around a family, each given a special gift, and the family matriarch stresses to all of them that their miraculous gifts are to be used to build up and benefit their local community. Sounds familiar, right? And on top of that, songs by Lin-Manuel Miranda, creator of the Broadway show Hamilton, so the songs stick in your head and give considerable nuance as events unfold. If you have never heard of this movie, you may be surprised to know that as of this past week, two songs from this movie have made it to the Billboard top ten, with one of them being the highest charting song from a Disney musical in 26 years. Not bad!

I'll try to avoid any blatant spoilers, but I do want to point out a few things. The story is told from the perspective of the only member of the family who wasn't given a fantastical gift. This being Disney, naturally she is essential to the story reaching a positive resolution, even if there is still a little mystery around exactly how that works. I am reminded that there are a great variety of spiritual gifts, and all are needed, and all compliment each other.

I would also expand a bit on this, because we regularly assess people by what they have achieved, or what they can do, or what they can offer us. This is natural for most of us — but it is essential that we don't limit people to what they can do for us, or how they have impressed us with their importance. If we are all one body in Christ, as scripture assures us is true, that we cannot discount or neglect **anyone**. All are part of the body of Christ, even if you can't readily tell how they contribute. In fact, you may never be able to tell how they contribute. But by now, we realize that God can see in ways we are unable to do, and God sees purpose in ways that aren't measurable by human standards.

What else? The members of the family are all identified with their gifts to the point that you can think of the person as their gift — when middle sister Luisa is described, it is always as “the strong one” — we are told virtually nothing else about her, or her

personality, except that she is “the strong one.” When she finally has her moment to give her perspective, we find out that she wishes she could “shake the crushing weight / Of expectations.” We find out that she wonders if she is worthless, if she can’t be of service. Her entire self worth is tied up in the expectations of others, that she can do anything they put on her, and she is pretty convinced that she only has worth as a human being if she is able to live up to every expectation.

Eventually, others realize that impossibly high expectations **of everyone** has caused a lot of harm, including Luisa but really hurting every member of the family, and that this must change. The family matriarch, who has been so adamant about striving for perfection and control, recognizes how she has contributed to this out of her own fear, and offers this apology:

*I'm sorry I held on too tight
Just so afraid I'd lose you too
The miracle is not some magic that you've got
The miracle is you, not some gift, just you
The miracle is you
All of you, all of you*

The whole person has finally been seen, finally been recognized — they are more than their gifts. And Paul tells us that if we do not have love, our gifts are as nothing. One of our foundational beliefs is that everyone has worth — not because of what they can do for you, or because of their talents — they have worth because they are beloved of God, and they have God-given worth. You have gifts, but they are not your identity. When God looks at you, God sees God’s own beloved, and nothing supersedes that.

We see this reflected in another character, Isabella, who seems to be effortlessly perfect. At one point, we learn that she has been following a script of perfection for so long, she has nearly forgotten what her genuine self was, and what she wanted, rather than doing what everyone else thought she should be doing.

Two things about this. For one, Paul reminds us that all parts of the body have value, and emphasizes that one part of the body cannot tell another part it is unneeded. And that is true — but something that happens all the time at least for what I can see, is that one part of the body decides that others are better than it is, and so does everything it can to be

that other part, and not be what God meant it to be. I read somewhere that if you were to judge creatures based on their ability to climb trees, a fish would think it was an imbecile, because the expectations are based on ignoring what God created it to be and to do.

The moment Isabella starts doing what she wants to do instead of what others want her to do? She has power she never had before, and she is happier than she has ever been before.

Paul stresses that we should respect the gifts that God gave to others. I think the other message here is that we should respect the gifts that God gave to us, rather than spending our lives trying to be something that goes against who we were created to be. This entire reading is on the value of love. **Please remember to give some of that love to yourself.** Please try to see that you are part of the beauty and strength God has created, and that God delights in you, too.

There is one more thing I want us to consider. I'm going to talk about Bruno. If you haven't seen the movie, one of the most popular songs is called "We Don't Talk About Bruno." He was gifted, just like everyone else in the family, but he had gifts that were unwelcome and unwanted. Sometimes he could see the future. When he would share what he saw, it made him an object of fear and an outcast. People thought he was making bad things happen to them, just by speaking the truth.

It is entirely possible that it may take a while for you to realize how God has gifted you — this is one reason we are offering a spiritual gifts class — and it is also possible that others won't see the giftedness in you. Paul is trying to give wise advise to the church in Corinth. Paul well knew that telling the truth as well as he could wasn't always going to be welcome, and in some cases made him an outcast, too.

The character of Bruno is virtually defined by his absence from this movie. By not talking about something, or by forbidding others from acknowledging something that is on everybody's mind, you give it power and presence — we talk about the elephant in the room, and we know that it only gets bigger when you try to ignore it.

You can also see this as a parable about sin. We confess our sin to God in order to be rid of it, so that we no longer need to carry that burden. When you don't talk about it, it gains power over you. You cannot fix a problem if you refuse to acknowledge that the

problem exists — and by making a pact to never discuss something hurting the family, the hurting only got worse, only gained power over them, and did more damage.

We talk about grace a lot. Grace is freely offered by God, should we accept it. Not accepting God's grace is a bit like cutting yourself off from the love that grounds your spiritual gifts. They are still there, but without love, they are just noise. When we ground ourselves in love, everything else begins to make sense.

There are a lot of characters in Encanto, so I could probably make a series just out of that, but I think you get the idea.

As I wrap this up, I note that In my last two sermons, I offered words from Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. He is so very quotable, yet just a few ideas are quoted constantly. Last week I heard something that was new to me, from his 1967 book *Where Do We Go From Here: Chaos or Community?*:

Power without love is reckless and abusive, and love without power is sentimental and anemic.

Power at its best is love implementing the demands of justice, and justice at its best is power correcting everything that stands against love.

Paul talks about the relationship between love and spiritual gifts. King is talking about the relationship between love and power, and then expanding that into how love and power relate to justice. King's words and structure are so similar to Paul's famous words in the scripture it is hard to believe it is a mere coincidence, particularly considering that King was a powerful preacher.

God has gifted us with spiritual gifts, and asks that we love each other as a family. Families are complicated, and have messy histories and relationships — but when grounded in love, even miracles can happen.

As we learn to deepen our grounding in the love of God, may it be so with us. Amen.