

Kailua Christian Church (UCC)
Sunday Worship, October 22, 2023
Message: “Quietly Effective”
Rev. Irene Willis Hassan

Scriptures:

1 Corinthians 13:1-13

13 If I speak in the tongues of humans 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[a] 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; it keeps no record of wrongs; 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 only a reflection, as in a mirror, 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 remain, these three, and the greatest of these is love.

Matthew 25:34-40

34 Then the king will say to those at his right hand, ‘Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world, 35 for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, 36 I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.’ 37 Then the righteous will answer him, ‘Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food or thirsty and gave you something to drink? 38 And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you or naked and gave you clothing? 39 And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?’ 40 And the king will answer them, ‘Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did it to me.’

Sermon: Quietly Effective

A couple weeks ago I delivered a sermon called “We Are The Salt and Pepper Shakers” in which I compared churches to bars. I’ve worked in both settings, and in some ways

they're very similar. Both are places people come together to share their lives and important moments.

In that sermon I compared a bar task – cleaning salt and pepper shakers weekly – to the spiritual maintenance that coming to church weekly gives us. I explained that I got fired for refusing to do that maintenance task one time when what I really wanted to be doing was engaging in meaningful conversation about the crisis that had happened to our community that week (Boston Marathon bombing).

The truth is that good bartenders, and good churches in continuation of this analogy between churches and bars, do both: they're there to guide conversations during times of crisis, and they also do the important maintenance work of cleaning and refilling.

And different bartenders have different gifts within the bar. At the bar in Boston there was a bartender, Johnny, who was a very big man, and he was very funny. Johnny used to connect the bluetooth on his phone to the digital Juke Box when he wasn't at work, and he'd remotely control the Juke Box to play nonstop Jim Hansen's Muppets Tunes just to annoy those of us who were working onsite. He used this humor to dispel arguments that happened at the bar, and in the case that his humor failed to break down an argument, he was big and he could easily disarm a volatile drunk person, which I also saw him do on a few occasions.

Johnny, however, could not stand to sit idly behind the bar doing tedious maintenance tasks while listening to the customers regale their life stories to him. In contrast, one of our other bartenders, Keira, was a smart, thoughtful young woman who was a very good listener. Keira would quietly cut lemon slices or clean kitchen utensils while she intently listened to the plight of a lone person sitting at the bar seeking an empathetic ear. She was good at making people feel comfortable and cared for, but you would never see her disarming a tense situation with her muscular or humorous power like Johnny. Different bartenders have different gifts, and they're all important to the function of the bar.

Bars themselves, like churches, have different personalities. Some bars are biker bars filled with cheap broken furniture, pool tables, and smoky air. I call these Matthew 25 bars, which are designed to be authentic and fearless in their cultural personalities. Other bars, like the one I worked at in Boston, are neighborhood joints with a calm

environment of solace and friendliness. I call these 1 Corinthians 13 bars, which are designed to be loving and thoughtful. Johnny was one of the only two bartenders at our bar who had the rough-and-tumble gifts of a person made for Matthew 25 bars; most of the staff were more like Keira in providing the comforting presence of 1 Corinthians 13 bars. When you walk into a Matthew 25 bar, you'll see more bartenders like Johnny;

when you walk into a 1 Corinthians 13 bar, you'll see more bartenders like Keira. Like bars, there are Matthew 25 churches and 1 Corinthians 13 churches.

Last week, I talked about how I would recommend some churches do a straightforward replication of Acts 4, where they give away all their possessions to the poor and live in a multi-class community with the homeless people living on their properties. But see, that church that I'm describing is a Matthew 25 church, filled with congregants gifted in principled engagement to rough-and-tumble populations. These Matthew 25 churches live into Jesus' call to stand with the "least of these" and uplift the vulnerable and oppressed through all the dynamic chaos that involves.

What you have here at Kailua Christian Church is not that.

We do have people here who represent the Johnnys of the world, who can engage with "the least of these" effectively. However, this is analogously a neighborhood bar, or more literally, a neighborhood church. Having a rough-and-tumble environment of deftly navigating chaos is not the energy that this church provides. The exact phrase I've heard many of you describe this church is "quietly effective". You're not showy, you're not dramatic; you embody a love that is patient, kind, and not envious or boastful or arrogant or proud.

In the past three months I've been with you, I've been observing and praying that God will show me your gifts and help me lift them up for His glory. What I've found in you is the loving, soulful rhythm of 1 Corinthians 13. The way that Pat and Jenny and Myra invite visitors in with abundant welcome without manipulative or desperate energy reflects the balanced resolve from this scripture. Dean and Paul and Kammy lead the church with steady patience that refuses to act like a noisy gong or clanging symbol. Debbie and Vernon and Reggie engage their faith to see the reflection in the mirror more clearly. Nani and John and Lowell demonstrate for us that faith, hope, and love remain, and the greatest of these is love. I see and hear the verses of this chapter from scripture in everything I see you all do.

I could go on and on about the spiritual gifts of this church and the living testimony I see in you faithfully living out 1 Corinthians 13. Luckily, I don't have to spend hours doing

that today, because you all have joyfully stepped up to my request to share those testimonies yourselves every Sunday and I thank you for doing so. Each of you are a gift to the church and the 1 Corinthians 13 culture you've created here.

I want to footnote this dichotomy I've presented between Matthew 25 churches and 1

Corinthians 13 churches to say that the Bible is a whole document; you can't pick and choose which parts suit you best. Johnny was a Matthew 25 bartender working in a 1 Corinthians 13 bar, because we need a little of both mixed in to make a strong community work. You may have noticed that while I see you as a 1 Corinthians 13 church, I'm quite clearly a Matthew 25 pastor. And I think one of the reasons you hired me is because you see that these two scriptures are not mutually exclusive and they need to be together to make the Kingdom of Heaven come alive.

But of course, like bars, churches have individual flavors that make them gifted at different missional strategies to make disciples and glorify God. So if a Matthew 25 church is where a homeless services center would fit, what fits in a 1 Corinthians 13 church?

1 Corinthians 13 churches, and this church in particular, are gifted at walking alongside people and being "quietly effective" about helping guide their calling from and relationship to Jesus. From your inception story of accompanying a woman in crisis, to supporting several students through seminary including Noelani, Dale, and Glenn, to even recent weeks in which you've walked alongside visitors to the church with steadfast compassion, this church is clearly one that will love people through their journeys as 1 Corinthians 13 calls us to do.

For this reason, in conversation with God, I've determined that the best use of our church is to do something that involves "quietly effective" accompaniment to seekers of Jesus. And I'm sure that determination came from God, because I myself would be much better at filling this church with homeless people and immigrants and addicts, but this isn't about me and I'm grateful that He has shown me a different way to build the church beyond my own comfort zone.

So who needs "quietly effective" accompaniment? Not homeless people, necessarily – they need someone that will be in the trenches with them, fighting their way out of disaster, which they can find in a Matthew 25 church. Instead, a population that is actively seeking guidance from God and could benefit from a "quietly effective" accompaniment is Seminarians. As I highlighted, you have a long history of

accompanying this population already. I told you last week that I would talk more this week about what I believe is the best future for this church, and I think that holding a Service Learning Community space for Seminarians to thrive in your support and guidance here may be what God is calling you to do.

A Service Learning Community is a group of students living and working together for a common purpose, usually between 3 months to 2 years. This population is intentionally

discerning their calling in a supportive community. This church would be very talented at providing that support in abundance. My proposal for this church is to repurpose the classrooms into dorm living spaces where we invite seminary students studying pastoral leadership, chaplaincy, and worship music to come live on the property together in community under our “quietly effective” care. This would not only help to bring fresh energy into the space and create a stronger future of young pastors to lead the church, it would also provide an outlet for you all to use the 1 Corinthians 13 gifts of “quietly effective” spiritual accompaniment that God has instilled in you.

There’s other options I have for the presentation as well, in case you want a little more Matthew 25 or something else. I also have a John 9 option, as you also have gifts in being present with healing through the Na Anela program and your general compassion for those experiencing physical illness. As I said, the Bible is a whole document, not a pick and choose buffet – so in the end, whatever we choose together should ultimately be for the purpose of glorifying God and making disciples in Christ. The question here is simply what gifts we have in this church to do exactly that.

You decided to keep this church alive when you hired me because you knew that you have special gifts to give in service to Jesus. I see those gifts and I’m proud to be a Matthew 25 pastor for your 1 Corinthians 13 church. My prayer for you is that whatever you choose to do with this church, it highlights those gifts that God has placed in you to glorify Him and make disciples in Jesus’ name.

Amen.