

The Love Manual

1 Cor. 13:4-13

Almost exactly five months from now, on July 9th,
a caravan of buses full of tired teens and adults will be wending its way up
the East Coast –
those folks will be tired, yes, but immensely satisfied with the work they will
have just gotten done.

Those 220 teenagers and 90 adults will have put new roofs on homes,
dug footers to stabilize foundations,
added siding to old homes where the wind had come whistling through.
Our Appalachia Service Project team will have done great work.

That's five months from now.

Right now, however, I am still recruiting those 90 adults
to accompany those 220 teens.

Teenagers I got. Adults – I'm still looking – are you paying attention?

One of the obstacles in recruiting is what I often hear from adults:

“Alida, I can’t do this, I have no idea how to fix things.”

When I hear that, I have the answer ready.

The answer is right here in this binder.

“Do not worry,” I say.

“This is the Appalachia Service Project Construction Manual.

Everything you need to know is in here.

Gotta put on a roof? Page 87.

Sheetrock? page 175.

A room addition? Page 309.”

Yes, over three hundred pages. It’s a big book.

But if there’s something you need to know about fixing someone’s home,

It’s here.

And indeed, many an adult from this church has ventured down to West

Virginia with a hammer in one hand

and this book in the other

and they’ve done amazing things.

It's all right here. In the ASP Manual.

A lot of *churches* have manuals, actually.

Big books with lots of directions on how to run a church,
everything from what robes the pastor should wear
to who can properly be on which committee
to how to do a church service right.

I grew up in a church that had a manual, called the Book of Order.

Being a rule-follower who liked to get good grades,

I made darn sure I had that thing memorized as a seminary student.

I knew the right prayers for the right days,

and I definitely knew what color I was supposed to be wearing when.

And yes, this is the right color for today.

When I came to Greenfield Hill Church in 1989,

as a very newbie pastor,

I asked where the manual was.

Where was the Book of Order which would tell me exactly what to do when,
while reminding me what to wear, too.

Here's what I discovered.

We don't have a Book of Order.

Which doesn't mean that we're disorderly.

I mean, in 20 minutes or so, we're going to be very orderly.

Our Church Council Chair will stand up here,

Scott Craighead,

and he'll remind us how Roberts Rules of Order work,

and we'll have motions and seconds and such

and we'll vote budgets and nominations and such.

So, we can be organized when we need to be.

But what guides us?

What leads us?

The manual of Greenfield Hill Church – well, it's this. *(Bible)*

All of you have a copy of it in your pews.

This is what we're working from.

This book.

This thousands-years old book.

This book which is, in truth, a love story.

The story of a God who loves us endlessly, without limit or boundary.

Of a God who decided that the best way to show us Love

was to come live among us and teach us how to Love.

This book is a love story

This book is *our* manual..

Everything we need to know about being church together is right here.

And its perhaps most beautifully summed up in the passage that I had Matt read to us just a few minutes ago,

First Corinthians 13 .

Odds are darn good that the last time you heard this passage you were at a wedding.

And it is a lovely scripture for weddings, it truly is:

Love is patient and love is kind, we remind couples,

Love is never arrogant or rude,

Love is not irritable, and doesn't keep track of wrongs.

Love bears all things and believes all things.

It is beautiful, and wedding -perfect.

But here's the interesting thing.

The Apostle Paul wasn't thinking about weddings when he wrote this part of his letter.

And he didn't know he was writing something that would later become scripture.

He was just writing a letter.

He was writing a letter to a bunch of fellow Christians in a city called Corinth.

He was writing to a church.

And it was a church that was having a lot of trouble figuring out how to **be** church.

The church ns Corinth was getting itself all tied up in knots over the silliest stuff.

Like who should get served first when you have communion.

In fairness, that was a bigger deal then because Communion wasn't just little pieces of bread and tablespoons of grape juice like it is now – back then it was a serious feast, and they wanted to know who should get to go first at the buffet table. And they were also stressing over who should be in charge, and really, who was most important in the church.

So they had reached out to Paul, because he was pretty much the church whisperer back then, and they basically asked him if he could write up some kind of manual for them, some kind of Book of Order.

Could he please come up with some rules they could follow to get things straightened out.

And Paul wrote back. And this is what he said.

He said, “hey, first of all, you're all equal in God's eyes, so enough with the fighting over who gets to be first in line.”

And then he wrote this. Last verse of chapter 12.

Let me show you a *better* way, said Paul.

Let me show you a better way.

And the better way? -- the better way is Love.

Listen up, says Paul.

You can be the most eloquent person there is,

you can speak with the tongue of an angel,

but if you don't have love, it's not going to work.

You can talk about your faith moving mountains,

you can give away everything you own to the poor,

but if you don't have Love, none of this is going to work.

Love is patient, and kind, said Paul.

Love doesn't pass judgment, or put other people down.

Love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude.

It does not insist on its own way.

Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things.

And his friends in Corinth read that,

looked at each other and said

“yeah, he’s right, that really would be a better way to be.”

And hugged each other and got their act together.

At least, we’re pretty sure that’s what they did.

Here at Greenfield Hill Church,

that better way, well, it’s *our* way.

We are, first and foremost, a First Corinthians 13 church.

At the center of what we do,

at the heart of what we believe,

our ultimate organizing principle is - Love.

Love for one another, love for the God who loves us,

and love for this world God created.

What matters to us is Love.

And everywhere I look in this church, I see you living that out.

When a dozen people crowd into our kitchen to make soup for others,

as they did last week, that’s love.

When a Confirmation mentor sits down with an 8th grader who's been having a tough week and all they do is listen, that's love.

When church folk carry load after load of supplies into an apartment for a refugee family and leave a teddy bear on a child's bed, that's love.

When kids take a week of their summer vacation to go fix someone's home, that's love.

When people gather to tell their stories in trust and hope, when someone who is tearing up finds themselves held in a hug – that's love.

When one of you comes into this Sanctuary early in the morning to light a candle for the babies we prayed for, that's love.

And you do it all the time.

You love with patience and kindness.

You *get* that being a church means doing love right:

not bearing grudges, not being irritable or rude.

You get that being a Christ-follower

means loving with a love that rejoices in the truth

and keeps no record of wrongs.

You are a Corinthians 13 church.

A church that loves like that – that loves like this --

with patience and kindness,

believing and hoping all things –

a church like that bears witness to the world that *this* is what it means to **be** church.

And oh is that ever important right now.

Our world needs to see what church looks like when it's centered in love.

Our world needs us to witness that *this is church*.

That **love** is church and church is Love.

And you do that, you do.

How grateful I am for your witness.

How proud I am to serve a Corinthians 13 church.

I'll close by remembering before you one who was a member of this church,
and one who himself bore witness to Love.

Yesterday we honored the life of Greg Michael,
who left us too soon, at 58.

Greg's life was lived with love –

love for his family, love of this church, love for a God who loved him.

His children each came up here and spoke of the love they felt
unconditionally from him, his wife Wendi, too --

his friends stood here and said the same.

And David and I also testified –

to a man who mentored our Confirmands,
served on our Boards, and sat in the front pew beaming
when his kids sang in the junior choir.

Greg was in the right church,

because all he knew how to do was love.

And at the close of the eulogies,

Greg's brother stood before us and said

“what would Greg say to us now?”

He'd say “Just keep loving each other, until we see each other again.”

That's how we closed our service for Greg Michael yesterday,
and that's how I'll end this message to you,
my Corinthians 13 church.

Just keep loving each other, my friends.

Just keep loving each other.

Amen.