



In football season,

lines are drawn on account of deep-seated
SEC/Big 12 or even

South Atlantic Conference alliances.

The same is true for ACC basketball
or the National versus American League of baseball.

Southerners just take their sports really seriously.

However, I am well aware,

that some of you could care less for sports
but will defend the superiority

of Diet Coke to any nay-sayer Diet Pepsi drinker in the bunch.

I can remember my 7th grade science class
at Grandveiw Middle School

using this Pepsi versus Coke war for multiple
blindfolded science fair projects.

We have made these things

sound divisive but really

this is largely about choices.

And naturally choice gives way to preference
and preference gives way
for hierarchy and prioritizing.

Which is what so much of this comes down to,
isn't that, right?



What is our preference?

The system is set up to make us pick and choose;
to have a pecking order to so many things.

The same is true

even in our life of faith.

We pick and choose what speaks to us

—most of us have a preference

for the either the Old or New Testament.

We prefer a certain style of worship.

But before jumping into the preferences

we have dumped into our religious traditions,

and, though I know there will be division on this issue,

I want to take a moment to tell you

the proper way to eat an Oreo cookie.



There are, in my opinion,
too many choices,

too many varieties of Oreos.

I do *prefer*, the Golden Oreos

—the vanilla cookie, double stuff cream variety—

I know this is not the original,

and truthfully,

when Nabisco first came out

with double stuff original Oreos,

they should have just stopped there.

No need for carrot cake

or birthday cake

or mint

or lemon.

I know some of you have eaten

your Oreos slathered with peanut butter for years.

There are those of you

who would never dunk an Oreo in milk
and others who can tell you
down to the second,
how long one ought
to hold the cookie submerged in a glass of milk.



The debate over dunk
or twist and lick,
is as old as time itself.

But I don't know anyone
who prefers to eat
just the chocolate cookies wafer cookies.
(Though now that I've said it,
someone will come to me after worship
and claim this title).

So, for the most part,
no one chooses or prefers
to only eat the outsides
and scrape out the cream center.
To do so,
is an abomination.

Oreos, you are thinking,
have nothing to do with the gospel, Heather.
Well, maybe.

But our passage this morning
is like the double stuffed cream filling
in between the chocolate cookies.

**1 Corinthians 13 is best digested
sandwiched between chapters 12 and 14.**

These 3 chapters in Paul's letter
to the church in Corinth,
 chapters 12, 13, and 14
 build on each other
 and depend on each other
 —the three go together like an Oreo cookie.

To take out chapter 13
as a standalone passage on love
 is akin to declaring
 that it is satisfying to eat an Oreo
 without its creamy center.¹



There's no doubt
 that these love verses are well known.
 However, we are not permitted
 to lightly skip over or discard
 this list of love's attributes and behaviors
 as though it were fluff.

We are not permitted to treat these verses
as though they only belong at weddings
or only apply to romantic love
 —on the contrary—
 they were written to a church community,
 a church community
 in the midst of division.

Chapter 12 of 1 Corinthians
 chooses the metaphor of the body
 to talk about the role and function
 of spiritual gifts within the life of the church.

¹ Melanie A. Howard, <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/fourth-sunday-after-epiphany-3/commentary-on-1-corinthians-131-13-7>

In this new community in Corinth,
church members are arguing and prioritizing
some gifts of the Spirit
over and against others.

If you were a teacher in the community,
you were gifted.

But if you could prophesy,
oh well, that mattered a little more

—so here move up the holy ladder a little.

And if you spoke in tongues,
oh well, that put up a way up on the ladder
close to Jesus himself.



At least this is what the Corinthians thought.

They thought some gifts

were more important than others.

And this meant certain people

were more important than others.

This created discord rather than unity.

It didn't foster the spirit

of a variety of gifts

being able to fit different tasks

so that ministry could be done efficiently.

Rather it fostered a narrow prioritizing over and against;

it fostered condescension

among the believers.

So, in chapter 12,

Paul spends considerable time,

laying out this body metaphor

to get his point across.

Can't you just hear, Paul the preacher,
pointing a finger from his pulpit—

¹²For just as the body is one
and has many members
and all the members of the body though they are many,
are one body,
so, it with Christ...

¹⁵If the foot would say,
“Because I am not a hand,
I do not belong to the body,”
that would not make it any less a part of the body.

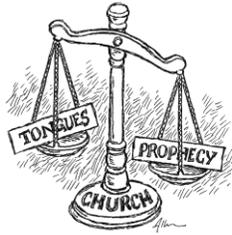
¹⁶And if the ear would say,
“Because I am not an eye,
I do not belong to the body,”
that would not make it any less a part of the body.

¹⁷If the whole body were an eye,
where would the hearing be?
If the whole body were hearing,
where would the sense of smell be?

¹⁸But as it is,
God arranged the members in the body,
each one of them, as he chose.

¹⁹If all were a single member,
where would the body be?

Paul goes to great lengths trying to get
that body of believers,
that congregation,
to see how imposing divisions create chaos
rather than unity in their diversity.
In order to downplay the assumed hierarchy in the church
Paul's sermon for chapter 12
claims that everyone's a role
in the body of Christ is equally important.



And jumping over to chapter 14,

Paul again tries to explain

how gifts given to the congregation
are to be used for the good of the whole.

He speaks directly to the gift of prophecy
and the gift of speaking in tongues.

Two highly exalted spiritual gifts.

²⁶What should be done then, my friends?

When you come together,

each one has a hymn,

a lesson,

a revelation,

a tongue,

or an interpretation.

Let all things be done for building up.

²⁷If anyone speaks in a tongue,

let there be only two or at most three,

and each in turn;

and let one interpret.

²⁸But if there is no one to interpret,

let them be silent in church

and speak to themselves and to God.

³⁹So, my friends, be eager to prophesy,

and do not forbid speaking in tongues;

⁴⁰but all things should be done decently and in order.

As this church struggles to understand its identity,

Paul offers instruction

to avoid divisive discord.

His point again,

is to help them see,

that diversity is an expression
of the Spirit's gifts
and in being divisive
they are directly not witnessing
to the present reality of God's coming kingdom.

But when you get a lot of people together,
with their different preferences,
and different opinions
and lots of choices,
well, how exactly
do you get a diverse community
to be a reliable witness to Christ's reality?



Wedged in between these chapters 12 and 14
are some of the most beautiful words
Paul or anyone has written.

And guess what—
they are words written
for THE CHURCH.

They aren't written for couples,
but we use them with couples
because in a marriage there tends to be
times of discord now and then.

These words weren't even written
to talk about feelings and emotions.

These words are written to the people of Christ,
who through the Spirit's power,
came to realize the freedom
and salvation

and mercy
and grace
that is Christ's to give.
These are people who decided
that in coming together
they are allowed to disregard
what culture or society or honor or status
might say about their personhood,
and instead claim an identity of belonging
so that in their coming together
they would be transformed into
the present reality
of God's kingdom here and now.

So again, when you get a lot of people together,
with their different preferences,
and different opinions and lots of choices,
how do you get a that kind of diverse community
to a reliable witness to Christ's reality?

That is chapter 13.

For chapter 12's admonishing
on being the body to be integrated,
for chapter 14's order and acceptance
to be realized,
you need instructions that bridge
the division we humans are good at maintaining.

It's all fine and dandy to talk about,
to preach about,
unity in diversity
and order and belonging
—but not a bit of it becomes actualized unless
—Paul says—
unless, there is something
beyond feeling and beyond fluff
beyond sentimentality
(Paul says) you need, love.

Paul ends chapter 12 with,
“I will show you a more excellent way”
and then begins chapter 13.
Listen now, for a word from the Lord.

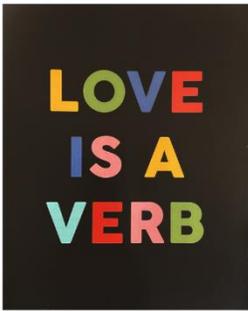
If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels,
but do not have love,
I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal.
²And if I have prophetic powers,
and understand all mysteries and all knowledge,
and if I have all faith,
so as to remove mountains,
but do not have love,
I am nothing.
³If I give away all my possessions,
and if I hand over my body
so that I may boast,
but do not have love, I gain nothing.

⁴Love is patient;
love is kind;
love is not envious or boastful
or arrogant ⁵or rude.
It does not insist on its own way;
it is not irritable or resentful;
⁶it does not rejoice in wrongdoing,
but rejoices in the truth.

⁷It bears all things,
believes all things,
hopes all things,
endures all things.
⁸Love 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.

⁹For we know only in part,
and we prophesy only in part;
¹⁰but when the complete comes,
the partial will come to an end.
¹¹When 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.
¹²For now we see in a mirror, dimly,
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.
¹³And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three;
and the greatest of these is love.



This!
This is the cream filled center!
It makes the cookie!!!

Chapter 13 is the double stuff
of chapter 12 and 14.

Love is the key,
the lynchpin,
the glue,
love is the cream -filled center of our church, Oreo cookie.

These words are written to First Presbyterian
and to Holy Trinity and St. Lukes;

to Hartzell and Discovery;
to Corinth and Ascencion
and West Baptist and Morning Star
and Yeah God and St. Andrews.

Not one thing we Christians can hope to accomplish together,
as the body of Christ,
not one thing can we hope
to do for the Lord
none of it can be done
if we do not first have this kind of **love**.

And not just lovey, dovey sentiment.
No, this type of love that is
alive and vibrant and ready.

The kind of love that isn't just patient
—really that translation makes it too passive.

Its better read like,
love waits patiently.
Love acts kindly.
Love squelches jealousy and boasting.

Love refuses to degrade
Love refines and polishes

Love graciously considers possibilities,
Love rejoices in affirming and belonging.

Love never admits defeat,
Because Love never tires, never stops, never falters, never ends.

That is love.
The driving, animating, creating force of the Triune God
that brings life and light and flourishing to
the body of believers.

So, friends, as the body of Christ,
And the many members of it,
As those who come together

To build up and to be sent out,
The proper way to eat an Oreo cookie,
Has nothing to do with twisting or dunk,
But has everything to do with
That cream-filled center.