

Five Kinds of Aloha
I Corinthians 13

FUPC
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Finally, on Tuesday this week, it will be over. At least I'm hoping it will be over. We'll have voted for our preferred candidates and there will be winners and losers. The winners will begin to plan for their new terms in office with optimism and hope. The losers will find reasons to complain and blame and second-guess themselves and wonder what went wrong. And given the distrust, animosity, profoundly deep differences and even hatred that has bubbled up during the past 18 months in our country because of the polarization of our beliefs and values, I'm thinking that healing will not come quickly or easily. This election can be described by many different words, mostly harsh and negative in nature. But one word that I would not use is our beloved Hawaiian word... Aloha.

And that's a shame. Because we've always held to the notion that we can disagree about many things in our public life, but we're still one nation, united by one constitution, with a common history and a profound respect for human dignity and common courtesy. What happened?

Every now and then, we need to recalibrate our inner moral and spiritual compass. This compass keeps us centered on a journey toward our fullest and highest aspirations. We are humans sharing a common home despite differences of belief, dogma, skin color, language, customs and food. We breathe the same air, laugh and cry, rage and pray. We are members of one common human family, but we've grown fragmented, disjointed, alienated, divided and ready to fight.

I keep coming back to Aloha. It's a word that helps to ground me, center me, and recalibrate my confused and scattered emotions into a place of harmony, moral clarity and inner peace. It's a word I turn to when I feel lost or discouraged, saddened or frustrated by the toxic conversations and relational smash-ups I see and hear all around me.

St. Paul would have loved this word. He wrote the classic New Testament description of the ancient equivalent of Aloha, which we know as Agape. Interesting that both words have five letters, both begin with "A" and both capture the essence of what we aspire to at our very best.

I Corinthians 13 doesn't just appear out of nowhere. Paul was writing to a church in conflict. In the church at Corinth, there had developed a deep division between the members. There were arguments over who was the more spiritual, who was favored by God, who had the highest gifts of service and spirituality, who were the best teachers. In this church, families and friends were driven apart by jealousy, pride, one-upsmanship, judgmentalism, and deepening dislike that resulted in insults and ugliness.

In chapter 12, Paul talks about the gifts of the Spirit given to the members for the good of the whole body. There was competition to see who could possess the most important gifts... teaching, prophecy, healing... because the gifts of service, cleaning up, putting the chairs and tables away, turning out the lights, paying the bills... these were considered the inferior and less important gifts.

So Paul begins chapter 13 by talking about the "greatest gift". It wasn't preaching, teaching, healing or prophecy. The greatest gift was the gift of love. The love Paul is talking about is not a romantic, sentimental and emotionally driven feeling. Rather it's a choice one makes in relationship to another person. To the degree that we are responsible for our choices, love is always an option.

Listen again to how Paul describes and defines love: First he tells us what this love is NOT: it isn't envious, it isn't boastful, it isn't proud, its never rude, its not self-centered, its not easily angered, it

keeps no record of wrongs, it doesn't delight in evil. Then Paul tells us what this love is like on the positive side: It's patient, it's kind, it is happy with the truth, it always protects, it always trusts, it always hopes, it perseveres, it never fails.

The Hawaiian word "Aloha" shares a lot in common with Paul's word Agape. "Aloha" is more than a word of greeting or farewell or a salutation. "Aloha" means mutual regard and affection and extends warmth in caring with no obligation in return. "Aloha" is the essence of relationships in which each person is important to every other person for collective existence. "Aloha" means to hear what is not said, to see what cannot be seen and to know the unknowable. There are five Hawaiian words that capture the deeper meaning of Aloha, the first letter of which forms an acronym:

Akahai – this is a word that has to do with showing kindness, tenderness, gentleness, being unpretentious, unassuming, unobtrusive.

Lokahi – this word is all about maintaining unity, harmony, oneness, identifying with each other, having empathy, showing understanding and compassion

'Olu'olu – this word refers to a spirit of graciousness, pleasantness, courtesy, respect, positive energy, an inviting presence

Ha'aha'a – a beautiful word having to do with humility, modesty, dignity, self-control, composure, quiet strength, poise

Ahonui – a word that teaches us about patience, perseverance, endurance, long-suffering, tolerance, reliability, dependability, consistency

These two words, Aloha and Agape, share a lot in common. They are of the same DNA, rooted in the same soil, and they share a common unstoppable power. It's a power to transcend differences and to transform conflict. There is power in this kind of love to dissolve hatred and embrace difference. This common love can heal hurt and injury, and touch with gentleness and compassion. In the church at Corinth, Paul invites each member to let go of pride, jealousy and resentment... and to make a choice to embrace each other, in all their differences... despite their differences... as one family, one body, one organism, alive and held together by love. Mutual respect, compassion, graciousness, patience, kindness and self-denial.

Let's bring this home. What does it mean for us to live with Aloha? What does it mean for you and me to live with this kind of Agape love? Think about the people in your life.

Who in your life needs to experience gentleness and tenderness because they've been treated harshly and exposed to unkind words and hurtful attitudes? They long to be treated with kindness, graciousness, tenderness, gentleness. You may be the one God uses to bring kindness and gentleness to them.

Who in your life is walking alone through a dark passage and is feeling lonely, forsaken, abandoned and forgotten? They just need someone to listen, to feel what they feel, to understand, to have compassion. You may be the right person to come along side and walk with them through a difficult passage.

Who in your life is hard to be around, raising feelings of impatience, anger, annoyance, irritation? They are the most difficult to love. Loving them requires self-denial, not giving up, not being rude, or

dismissive, or judgmental. This is the miracle love of God that enables us to transcend our natural human tendency to judge and condemn. Do you have anyone in your life that seems to push your buttons and have the remote control to your happiness and peace...?

Where in your life do you need to become more aware of pride and arrogance? Are you convinced that you are always right and that your ways are always the only way, the true way, the most sensible way? Is humility and self-control a challenge for you? Must you win every battle? Think about it. Always getting our way, being demanding, always having to be right, is a great way to lose friends and find ourselves alone. Is this an issue?

Who have you failed by not showing up? In what situations have you blown it by procrastinating, tuning people out, avoiding responsibility? How can you be more reliable? More patient? More dependable? Where do you need to step up? Where do you need to step out of hiding and make yourself visible and available for the sake of another person or a situation or an issue or problem that you may be able to do something about?

Love gets dirty. Love speaks up. Love accepts responsibility. Love isn't afraid to sweat. Love risks being misunderstood. Love sacrifices. Love accepts differences. Love never fails.

Who do you love? How could you love them better?
Amen.