

U BEFORE I

Remember that sing-song little rule your English teach taught you in grade school, “I before E except after C” ? This was supposed to help us spell words like, *friend, thief, and yield*, or other words like *ceiling, receive, or deceit*. I still have trouble remember how to spell receive. I've done it wrong so many times on my word processor that it goes ahead and corrects it for me automatically!

Teachers gave us these rules to help us remember, but as we got older, we also learned that there were many other exceptions and more rules for spelling. In Britain, I'm told that the “I before E” rule has become so confusing that they're doing away with it in their schools.

Spelling rules, like “I before E” might be a good way to better understand today's scripture lesson from 1 Cor. 13. This chapter is probably the most familiar

passage of scripture, other than the 23rd Psalm. It's probably used more than any other at weddings. And that's understandable. With words like “*Love is patient, love is kind, love is not envious or boastful or arrogant...love never fails...faith, hope and love, these three, but the greatest of these is love,*” who wouldn't want them as part of their wedding vows.

If you're over 40, you probably remember that old antacid commercial: “How do you spell relief? ROLAIDS” Well, today's lesson might be the answer to the question, “How do you spell LOVE?” But in order to spell love, you've got to know some rules for this too, just like “I before e.” Check out these rules (Peterson's translation)

Love never gives up, cares more for others than self, doesn't want what it doesn't have, doesn't strut, doesn't have a swelled head, doesn't force itself on others, trusts God always, always looks for the best, never looks back, keeps going to the end.

It's pretty clear that according to these rules, SELF always takes a back seat to the OTHER. In other words, to love like Jesus, "U" always comes before "I".

"U comes before I." That's the rule of love. Sounds great, but how hard is it to do—to always be putting others before ourselves? Sure, we know that we should always be thinking of others and putting others needs before our own, but it's so hard to do! Why is that? Well, think about it. From birth, we're helpless and totally dependent upon someone till we almost reach adolescence! That's about when we realize that the world does NOT revolve around us and that we're NOT the center of the universe! I know some people who are still stuck there and still think this way. There's a word for this: narcissism.

So the "U before I" thing basically goes against our grain, against our instinct. I'm told that there's only

two groups in the world whose members work exclusively for the benefit of the community or who put self last. Who are they? Some remote tribe in the heart of the Amazonian or African jungle? No. It's ants and cockroaches! Isn't it funny that scientists had to go OUTSIDE our own species to find an example.

For people, and for churches, this "U before I" thing is a real struggle. For many people, being a Christian is all about the personal relationship with Jesus; the personal holiness of the individual; and the personal experiences of the Holy Spirit. Of course, there's a personal aspect of the faith and it DOES begin with a personal intimate relationship with Jesus, but it doesn't stop there! The Christian faith was always meant to be communal; about the group, about the other!

Many churches fall victim to this kind of thinking when they become so inward focused that they forget that it exists to serve the community and not just its members. Two key tenants of the Christian faith, according to Scripture, are compassion and empathy towards others; to love our neighbors as ourselves. But this isn't easy for some churches. They have to work at it, practice it over and over again.

Paul uses a funny sounding Greek word for love that was used very seldom in the world of his day. It's called AGAPE. In the Greek language, there are many words for love to help express the various aspects of love. For instance, there's EROS. This is the romantic, sexual kind of love between a boy and a girl, man or woman. Then there's PHILLIA, or brotherly love—the kind of love between brothers or sisters or friends. Then there's STORGE. This is the love a parent has for a child. But Paul uses a

different word to describe the kind of love the church folk should have for one another-- AGAPE. You see, AGAPE means sacrificial, self-giving love; love that isn't earned and is unconditional; the kind of love that puts the other ahead of self, or put another way, puts the “U” before the “I”. It's the kind of love that asks, “What's best for you?” instead of “What's in it for me?”

The best example of this I can find in scripture is Jesus on the cross. Sure, Jesus could have walked away from his destiny and said, “No way. This is too hard; too high a price to pay.” But he didn't, thank God! The agape love Jesus gave us at the cross gave us instant forgiveness of sin and justification before God, no matter what we've done. Paul gives us the “rule of love” today because even though we may have accepted Jesus as Lord and Savior, been baptized and confirmed, we still need help spelling love in our daily lives—in our actions and our

attitudes!

You've been hearing me talk about how the church is being a verb lately, and not just a noun. Some of you have even taken the time to thoughtfully write something on our wall out in the hallway!

When you stop and think about it, especially in light of today's scripture, you can see that love is a verb too! Love is an action word. Listen to Paul's words again, "Love never gives up, it cares more for others, trusts God always, never looks back, is patient, kind, and rejoices and bears all things.

All action words! It doesn't matter if we're talking about the person or the church. Really, it's one in the same. We as God's people are called to exercise the greatest gift of all the gifts given by the Holy Spirit—LOVE. When we exercise loving actions and attitudes, good things happen—to the

church, the community and to the person doing them

Here's what I'm talking about. There's a man in our congregation whose wife suffers from early stages of Parkinson's. Because of his love for his wife, and his love for others, and because he has a passion to see others get the support they need, he has virtually single handedly organized a support group that meets at the Tunnel Cancer Center every week. It began with a handful of people. Last time I checked with him, he's over a 100 now! Not only that, right now he's putting together a symposium to be held at the Rehoboth Convention center sometime soon.

You see, this is what I mean by the church being a verb and not just a noun. This is what taking someone's gift, with a passion for God and compassion for others, and taking action to meet a

need really means! And it all began with the rule of love!

Or how about the people working at the AG's office right down the street? Someone thought it would be nice to perhaps bring in lunch for these folks every day. These are the attorneys, administrative staff, counselors, and law enforcement officials that are working with victims from the Bradley case 7 days a week! I'm sure they'll appreciate someone bringing them lunch so they don't have to worry about going out. LOVE IS A VERB!

Then there are the UMCOR health kits. Yesterday a group of volunteers here at Bethel put together 320 health kits to be sent to Haiti. Then in February, we're going to provide health screenings for both hypertension and eye care. LOVE IS A VERB!

These are just a few of the things we are doing right

now to help meet some very important needs in our community, and to help them connect with the love of God in a special way.

Let me just say this: You are a very generous church. You give and give and give lots of money to some very important causes. This church definitely has the gift of giving. Did you know that last year, 2009, you gave \$46k in mission and outreach? That's right. Our annual report the AC shows that from all our giving, we gave benevolences of over \$50 if you include the WSF built into our apportionment giving. This means that we're a tithing church—10% of our annual budget is given in benevolences! Congratulations!

Let me close by saying this: All this means is that we're still learning—learning how to spell LOVE for others. We need to keep learning how to spell it because Jesus taught us that putting U before I is

key to being faithful to God. Remember, It's the second greatest command: Love your neighbor as yourself...and that's second only to loving God!

Amen.