

A Sermon for the Last Sunday after the Epiphany, Year C  
February 18, 2007 – 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians 12:27–13:13  
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## *The Gift of Love.*

**A**s I'm sure you all know, Valentine's Day was last Wednesday. If you didn't know that, you might want to check around because you're probably in really deep water with someone. I'm happy to say that the members of the Cook family are all in good standing with each other, and we are still enjoying the cookies and heart-shaped chocolates that seem to pop up at this time of year. And it should come as no surprise to anyone that Valentine's Day is one of the high-water marks of the greeting card industry because, on that day when the very idea of love looms large in our lives, what better way is there to demonstrate your love for that special someone than by giving him or her a card?

Interestingly, we don't know much about the man for whom the day is named. St. Valentine seems to have been a Roman priest and bishop who died as a martyr around AD 269. And, somehow, a man who died nearly 1,750 years ago, got linked with an ideal of romantic love; hence, we now have St. Valentine's Day.

Today's reading from 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians is another thing that we tend to associate with the idea of romantic love. It's a chapter of the Bible that gets read at so many weddings because, to be honest, it's a beautiful piece of writing that gives us a glimpse of the heights to which human love can rise.

However, just like St. Valentine, 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians 13 originally had nothing to do with romantic love.

When Paul wrote his letter to the Christian community in Corinth, they were in a mess. Corinth was a busy, thriving city, and a center of commerce and trade. People came from all over to settle there, and they brought with them all sorts of ideas and values. And so when the church was established there (which would have been only about 15 or 20 years after Jesus' death and resurrection), its congregation was made up of essentially the same mixed bag of people: rich merchants, freed slaves, temporary residents, and lots of people who were just passing through.

And, apparently, they were an argumentative lot, with people asking lots of questions, and constantly struggling about things like who was the most important, or whose views should determine the life of the community. People would fuss about things like: Who was more important, those who had been baptized by Peter, or those who had been baptized by Apollos? Within the same congregation, there were different opinions about sexual morality. Christians were filing lawsuits against each other. Some people were continuing to worship their old gods or idols right alongside Jesus, while others were shocked at the mere thought of it. Even the celebration of the Holy Eucharist became a place for the wealthy to feast, and the poor to go hungry.

And yet, in the middle of all that mess, and despite their differences, they still got on with the business of being the church, meeting to worship week by week. And it's in the midst of all of this stuff that's going on, that Paul offers them a different way, and he describes it with those words we hear so often at weddings:

*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.*

*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.*

*If 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.*

Now, despite the liturgical context in which we usually hear this passage, I'm certain that Paul was not particularly concerned about marriage. In fact, I think he's far more worried about the love that people have for each other as church members. And we know this by virtue of the vocabulary which Paul employs. And if you will allow me, I'd like to give you a sixty second Greek vocabulary lesson.

There are four Greek words that get translated into English as love. First, there is *storge* (στοργή *storgē*), which describes the natural affection of parents for their children. And then, there is *philia* (φιλία *philia*), which describes the affection shared by friends. Third, there is *eros* (ἔρως *ērōs*), which describes the passionate and sensual affection shared by lovers. And, finally, there is *agapé* (ἀγάπη *agápē*), which describes one person's willingness to be totally committed to another, and to give sacrificially on behalf of that other. In this passage, Paul is talking about *agapé*.

This sort of "love" is probably not the first thing that comes to mind when we hear the words of 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians 13. Because, in our culture, we tend to reserve the word "love" for partners and family members. But what Paul is talking about is loving the people who sit in the pew behind you, or in front of you, or over on the other side of the church. And not because you necessarily have anything in common. And not because you even know them. And especially not because they've earned it. But rather because God loves you, and me, and everyone else in this room. And because God loves us, we love one another.

Here's another sixty second lesson: If Paul decides, as he apparently did, that he needs to write to the Corinthians about love, it's not because they're doing a good job of it. Rather, it's because they're doing a *poor* job of it. Even though some in their church have the spiritual gift of being able to speak in tongues (which was considered by some then as *the* prime gift), or of wisdom, or of understanding, or of foresight, if they exercise it without *agapé* love, they're no better than an irritating noise. And though they may think they're something special, they're not.

Even if they give away the things most precious to them, but do it for themselves, so that they can boast about it, they've gained nothing.

And, clearly, Paul's point is this: When *agapé* love is missing from the equation, the result – no matter how magnificent the accomplishment, power, or action – the result is vain, selfish, and fruitless. And so, it's clear that Paul holds two convictions close to his heart. First, that it is in the nature of love to seek out the needs of others first. And, second, in doing so, such love ultimately secures not only the good for the other person, but also the good for one's own self. It's very much like what Jesus said in Matthew 10: "Whoever finds his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it" (vs. 39).

And then, Paul talks further, not only about what this type of love is, but also about what it isn't. Love is: patient and kind, it rejoices in the truth, it bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, and endures all things. However, love isn't: envious, boastful, arrogant, pushy, irritable, or rude. In other words, this sort of love is not the warm fuzzy feeling you get when you fall in love, and it's not a craving for physical intimacy. In fact, it's not primarily about emotions, but instead about a decision you make. A decision to be in a relationship where you seek the best for the other person, the best for the community. It's taking time to get to know each other. It's doing things that build one another up. It's making choices that are loving, and share the love of God. That's what Christian love is all about. We belong together, and at the heart of that belonging is love.

And so, what does this love look like in real life? Most of the time it's small stuff. It's about taking opportunities to get to know other people in the congregation, whether it's at coffee hour, joining in an activity, or just introducing yourself after church. It's about sharing your lives, maybe inviting people over for a meal. It's about helping out with a rambunctious kid in church, or inviting someone without much family to share yours. It's about seeing if there is some way you can help out someone else, or maybe just enjoying one another's company over a cup of coffee. Just small stuff, most of the time. And all those small acts of love, reflect the bigger love of God. And it's a love that inspires us to keep on living, and to keep on loving in God's name. And wherever that love is, there we see the love of God.

I'm reminded of a very simple song that comes out of the Taizé community. Taizé is an ecumenical religious community in France. It was founded in 1940 around the ideal that simplicity and kind-heartedness could be lived out as essential Gospel realities. There are over 100 brothers in that community, a mix of Roman Catholic and Protestant, and they come from more than twenty-five countries. Some of the brothers live among the poor in Asia, Africa and South America, sharing everything they have, and striving to be a loving and non-anxious presence among the people they serve. And the song I'm thinking about, usually sung in Latin, begins like this:

*Ubi Caritas et amor Deus ibi est.*

Translated into English, this first line reads: “Where charity and love are, there is God.” And the rest of this song, in English, goes like this:

*Where charity and love are, God is there.  
Christ’s love has gathered us into one.  
Let us rejoice and be pleased in Him.  
Let us fear, and let us love the living God.  
And may we love each other with a sincere heart.*

*Where charity and love are, God is there.  
As we are gathered into one body,  
Beware, lest we be divided in mind.  
Let evil impulses stop, let controversy cease,  
And may Christ our God be in our midst.*

And the last verse:

*Where charity and love are, God is there.  
And may we with the saints also,  
See Thy face in glory, O Christ our God:  
The joy that is immense and good,  
Unto the ages through infinite ages. Amen.*

Now, don’t get me wrong: I’m glad for the annual celebration of St. Valentine’s Day, but mostly because I like getting nice cards, and candy. But this is not the kind of love that Paul is talking about, or the kind of love that Jesus talks about. And it’s not something you can express through a greeting card. For the love of God, gospel love, is something different, and harder, but better. So much better. And that, my friends, is something to celebrate.