

A Sermon for Quinquagesima, February 22, 2009

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I must confess to having a certain prejudice against today's epistle, St. Paul's famous meditation on love (1 Corinthians 13:1f.). My prejudice has nothing to do with the passage itself, but with my experience of its use. It is a popular wedding passage among those who are not particularly serious about their faith. I've attended over half a dozen weddings at which this passage was read, and was best man in two of them. Most of the couples are now divorced—love never fails, indeed!

The problem with this passage is one that is common with great Bible passages. The beauty of the words generates an emotional response that serves to mask just how difficult and challenging the teaching really is. If we really hear St. Paul, we won't respond by saying, "How lovely." If we really hear, we will respond by saying, "I'm not sure I always love like that. Maybe I need to change."

The archaic translation of the King James Version helps us here. The KJV speaks of "charity," not love. This highlights the fact that St. Paul is talking about something that is different than what we typically think of when we say "love." He is not talking about feelings or emotions and he certainly isn't talking about lust, which is so frequently mistaken for love in our culture. St. Paul is talking about agape, the kind of love that comes from God, as when St. John says, "God is love."

The New Testament word for the love of God, agape, was translated into the Latin *caritas* and then into English as charity. It is one of three theological virtues mentioned in our epistle—faith, hope and charity. We acquire the theological virtue of charity as the Holy Spirit teaches us to love the way God loves and not the way that is typical for our culture or our natural inclinations.

In the gospel today, Jesus says, "Behold we go up to Jerusalem." Then he prophesizes about his impending passion, death and resurrection. This passage fits on the calendar today because Lent starts on Wednesday. Lent is envisioned as a journey to Jerusalem with Jesus. Behold *we* go up to Jerusalem. Lent assumes that we will, in some manner, share in the cross of Jesus by self-denial so that we may share in his resurrection on Easter.

This passage fits with the epistle because it is a picture of the virtue of charity, or love. Jesus is going up to Jerusalem to die for us, to give himself so that we might live. He is doing this because charity suffers long and seeks not her own. We don't typically read the Passion at a wedding, but we might have more successful marriages if we did—if we understood that warm feelings aren't enough, if we understood that love requires that we suffer for the good of the beloved, whether we feel like it or not.

Jesus goes up to Jerusalem as love incarnate, at every step of the way doing the things that love would do. We go up to Jerusalem with him as flawed lovers, often yielding to our fallen tendencies, often unkind, envious and puffed up. The goal of Lent is to learn to love more.

Lent calls us to a seasonally intensified practice of the disciplines that Jesus describes in Matthew 6: fasting, prayer and almsgiving. These will teach us to love inasmuch as we practice them penitentially, with specific attention to what is amiss in our lives.

We need look no further than the biblical Pharisees to see that it is quite possible to fast, pray and give without love and, so, have no benefit from the disciplines. For, “If I bestow all my goods to feed the poor...and have not charity it profiteth me nothing.”

We fast because our idols hinder our ability to love. We are attached to things so that we are not able to worship God and love others as we ought. Our potential idols include food, drink, pleasures entertainments, money, possessions, media and relationships. If there is something in our lives that we cannot do without, or that looms too large, that something is a candidate for the Lenten fast.

Fasting should create more space for prayer. We pray because we learn to love through the experience of God’s love, and we experience God’s love chiefly through prayer. Through the life of prayer—the liturgy, the daily office, conversational prayer, silence and meditation—we learn about grace. We learn that God loves us, not because of who we are but because God is love. Through the life of prayer, we experience how God suffers long with us, how he never gives up on us and how he always works for our good. We can only love others with the theological virtue of charity after we experience that kind of love from God, for we cannot give others what we do not have ourselves.

We give alms—of money, time and labor—because in Christ we have become full; because, in Christ, it has become our natural inclination to give. God loves and gives because he is full of Trinitarian love and his love naturally flows into creative and redemptive action. When we live in Christ we become filled with all the fullness of God (Ephesians 3:19). We learn to give as God gives.

Giving is the divine response to the devil, who always takes. The devil took the world for himself, but God gave his only Son to save it. Giving is not a zero sum game as the devil would have us believe. What we grasp we end up losing, but, by the practice of almsgiving, we learn that what we give away we keep. We learn to remember the words of the Lord Jesus, how he said, “It is more blessed to give than to receive.”

The Lent that would end with new life on Easter must begin with confession. We might profitably begin our self-examination with today’s epistle. First Corinthians 13 tells us that love suffers long, is kind, does not envy, is not boastful or arrogant or rude, does not demand its own way, is not easily provoked.

We might prepare for Lent by asking, Is that I? Am I patient with others, as God is patient with me? Am I envious of others, or am I as glad for the good that God has given them as I am for the good God has given me? Am I proud, anxious to show others how superior I am, or do I practice humility, serving others as Christ has served me? Am I considerate of others; do I think of what is good for them? Or do I think mostly of what is good for me? Does my love for God and others bear all things and endure all things? Does my love never fail? Or is there room for growth?

Behold, we go up to Jerusalem.

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