

Our Need For Love

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[0 : 00] Our God and Father, we ask that you will open our hearts to your word and open your word to our hearts, and we ask it in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. I don't want to pass this Sunday up without looking at the epistle for this Sunday, which is one of the best-known chapters in the whole of Scripture.

And in order that you might follow it, if you would turn in your prayer book to the epistle for the day, which is found on page 136, and it's the 13th chapter of 1 Corinthians.

Beginning, though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels and have not charity, I am become a sounding brass or a tinkling cymbal. If you were a stranger who came into church today, one of the things that you might find interesting is that, well, just supposing you did come, and wonder what the things are that you're most aware of.

I hope that you'd be aware of the excellence of the choir and that anthem which they just sang, simply because the loveliness of their singing adds, I think, very considerably to our worship. But what other things would you be aware of? Well, in the first part of Corinthians chapter 13, it talks about those things which are most prized in any congregation.

[1 : 50] And one is that you have a great golden-tongued preacher, and that people have the ability to articulate the faith, the ability to exercise rhetoric in a way that moves people deeply.

It may not move them to do anything as long as it moves them. And so you have great people who have been able at particularly critical times in history to be able by rhetoric to move people.

Reading the story of Germany before the war and how some of the masterminds of the National Socialist Party knew that there happened to be a very eloquent speaker who was good at moving crowds, he was a comparatively unknown figure by the name, just a very minor person in the party, except for his ability to speak.

And his name was Adolf Hitler. And so they brought him in to speak for them and to make known the aims of the National Socialist Party, and they soon found that he was a god among them.

And you know what happened as the result of his ability to speak to vast crowds of people. So that Paul, with great discernment, says, though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels and have not charity, it doesn't work.

[3 : 16] It doesn't happen, even within a congregation. The essential ingredient is something that happens between people and people. It's the bond of relationship between people and people, and it's called love.

So that even though you may have people who can speak with ecstatic tongues or great masters of rhetoric, still if there isn't this basic quality in the congregation, something of the greatest importance is missing.

And so we have to look at our own congregation and see whether or not that special gift is there with us. The second thing that you might consider to be really worthwhile in a congregation if you were visiting is that you find people with prophetic might.

That is, they are able to lay bare the very bones of the social structure of the community in which you live, and to show you the dishonesty and the corruption and the willfulness of men's hearts. And they are like a Jeremiah among his people, able to say, these are the issues, this is what's happening. And everybody stands up and says, yes, how could we ever have been deceived into allowing that to happen?

[4 : 38] Such is the power of a great prophet that he can open those issues up to people. Or you might have a wise man who knows all about the wisdom and the accumulated wisdom of the ages.

Or you might have a teacher who understands all knowledge, so that the vast scope of human knowledge is open and available to him.

But all these gifts in the church still are of no value, unless there is love. He says that the sum total of it is nothing.

And then you may have in the church very gifted people. People with the gift of faith. The kind of faith that can move mountains.

You may have people in the congregation who have extraordinary wealth. And if they were to take all their wealth and divide it up into grocery loads for everybody in the city, that would be a remarkable thing to happen.

[5 : 52] It would claim television coverage and newspaper coverage that somebody had given away a king's ransom in groceries to the needy people of the city. And it would be a remarkable thing indeed.

And people would come and gawk and wonder that anybody could make such a sacrifice. Or even if somebody, because they believed in something greatly, would give their body to be burned.

So again, it would capture a great deal of publicity. But unless there was the reality of love, that it would all be worth zero. So you can have a church that has orators, prophets, wise men, teachers, doers of miracles, givers of great fortunes, missionaries that will go to the farthest end of the world, and yet there can be something which is essential to the life of the church, which is missing.

And that's what 1 Corinthians 13 and this Quinquagesima Sunday is to remind us of. That all the mechanics of relating person to person doesn't work unless there is love.

And all the great gifts that we might aspire to doesn't work unless there is love. The essential quality of what's going on at St. John's in Shaughnessy must be love between people.

[7 : 22] That has to be there. And it's a very specific kind of love. It's not gooey or soft or anything like that. You know the catalog of what kind of love it's to be.

It's to be patient and kind. You know what kind of love it's not to be. It's not to be jealous love. It's not to be boastful, ostentatious love.

It's not to be arrogant love, puffed up with pride. It's not to be rude, behaving improperly towards someone else. It's not to be the kind of love which is so magnificent it insists on its own way in a contest of law.

It's not to be irritable love which if somebody denies it, it flies into a rage. It's not to be resentful love which stores up wrong.

None of these things are to characterize this love. And because those things are so characteristic of us and of our love that you see it all the time.

[8 : 31] You see it when groups of people meet. You see it in relationships between neighbors. You see that kind of love manifesting itself all the time. But that's not the kind of love on which the church is to be built.

It's a love which isn't characterized by those things. It's a love which is not to rejoice at wrong. You know how nice it is to catch somebody out so that they are caught doing the wrong thing.

It's love that rejoices at right. It's love that rejoices in truth. I find that a particularly helpful concept of love because the truth is something to rejoice about.

It's something which is essentially funny. And when you see the truth you are inclined to laugh because you are suddenly made aware of the nature of the truth.

Truth is not a solemn thing. Truth is something that you laugh hysterically almost when you come across it. And the reason is because the truth concerns God and his ultimate purpose.

[9 : 43] And you know that the history of the stage has those two masks. The mask of the one person which represents tragedy and everything is drawn down in sorrow. And then there's the mask of the other person in which everything is drawn up in glee.

Well the fact of the gospel of Jesus Christ is that ultimately there is that life is not a tragedy but a comedy. And it's a comedy not in the sense of being in any way light and trivial.

It's a comedy because there is inevitably a happy ending. And that's how you define a comedy. And the purposes of God are such as to rejoice at the truth because you are aware that the end purpose of God is good.

And when you glimpse that end purpose even from the midst of your personal suffering you are caused to rejoice. And that's why when a congregation comes together on a Sunday morning and the truth of the gospel is given to them in the words read the truth of the gospel is given to them in the sacrament administered there is reason for love to rejoice because love confronts the truth and when love confronts the truth rejoicing happens.

No matter who you are no matter how predisposed you may be to melancholy or depression or feeling sorry for yourself when love confronts the truth rejoicing takes place because the kind of love we're talking about is the love which rejoices in the truth.

[11:28] You don't need to be reminded that if you're not rejoicing something's wrong. This love bears all things that is it believes all things when evidence is adverse and it hopes for the best.

You know how terribly how terrible a thing it is in our modern media where even a whisper of a suggestion about some moral indiscretion of one of the leaders of our land is greeted by condemnation in the minds of those that hear it.

As soon as we hear it we carry it to its full limit and imagine that that is what's happening. But love says wait a minute the evidence is not in yet and I'm not prepared to believe that until I can be assured.

It believes the best about people even when the evidence is adverse it continues to hope for the best. It hopes all things even when hopes are constantly disappointed love courageously waits. It endures all things. And that's the kind of love which is which is necessary the kind of love on which the community of Christ's people is built.

[12:58] It goes on to say about love that it never ends. Prophecies will end. They will pass away. And tongues will cease and knowledge will pass away.

That is knowledge is always imperfect. It's not complete. And prophecy is never complete. And these are just husks of things.

The knowledge that we have is only the husk by which which contains in a sense the truth which we confront in Jesus Christ. And at one point the husks have to pass away because they're of no further significance.

And prophecies have to pass away because they're of no further significance. And suddenly you confront love and it is of continuing significance.

I remember hearing the story of a mathematics professor whose knowledge of mathematics was so amazing that people all around knew about and he was a complete eccentric so devoted was he to mathematics and there came the time of his retirement and he was no longer involved in mathematics and he had nothing left.

[14:15] The tremendous knowledge on which his reputation was built suddenly was meaningless to him and his life was meaningless too because that was all there was, was knowledge.

And knowledge by definition passes away and prophecy passes away but love remains and that we can go on exercising.

And it says further about love that the perfect is going to come and when the perfect comes all these things which are imperfect pass away.

And you see the purpose of love is to bring us all to perfection and we can't come to perfection by knowledge we can't come to perfection by prophecy we can't come to perfection by anything that we do we can only be brought to perfection by being the recipients of the love of God and that's the purpose of God is to bring each one of you to perfection God isn't satisfied with anything less we would be quite satisfied if God would just give us the grace to get by from day to day but God insists on bringing us to a state of perfection before him and the greatest challenge of our lives is to let God do what he purposes to do and what he wants to do and how does he do it?

He does it by love so that you can say when I was a child I spoke like a child I thought like a child I reasoned like a child when I became a man I gave up childish things those things ultimately must pass and we must come to see ourselves as we are seen by God and to see the purpose of his perfecting activity in our lives to see the thing that God wants to bring us to but you know that it's hard to receive love and sometimes it's hard to give love and I think the only way we can learn to give love is when we have learned to receive love and the love which God has shown us in Jesus Christ is so often very threatening to us and we hold on to the kind of shreds of our pride and shreds of our self-esteem and shreds of our vanity and we hold on to that and by holding on to it we sometimes resist the love which God wants to show us and we protect ourselves or insulate ourselves from the love which God has for us and which he wants to bring us to even as we want to see a child grow up so God wants us to grow up into his love and to be willing to receive the love which he has for us and he seems to take away one thing after another and leave us almost cornered that we have to be cornered by his love in order that we may be conquered by his love and then they have that beautiful picture now we see in a mirror dimly then we will see face to face that is we begin to see ourselves as God sees us in Christ if you could see yourself as God sees

you you'd be delighted but unfortunately you only can see yourself as you see yourself and that's so often a disappointing experience but we shall see even as we are seen we will begin to know as we are known now I know in part then shall I understand fully even as I have been fully understood and the basis you see of our whole life in Christ is that the reason we go to God the reason we turn in repentance and faith the reason we're baptized into

[18 : 52] Christ is that we are baptized because God is the one who knows us fully and completely he is the one that understands us we don't understand ourselves but we turn to the one who knows us and the experience you see of Christian faith the experience of encountering Jesus Christ is that you encounter someone who knows all about you when we went to England to stay for six months once upon a time we came into a completely strange village where we had never been before in our lives and we didn't know where to go we didn't even know the address of the place we were going to live so we stopped and asked the milkman and the milkman said to us when we said can you tell us where this address is he said oh you must be Mr. Robinson and he'd already been told to deliver milk to our house so he knew who I was and it's the strangest experience to suddenly find somebody knows you and I think that the whole experience of life in Christ is that you are constantly discovering that somebody knows you when you suspected that nobody knew where you were or what you were doing you suddenly find that someone knows all about you that you are fully understood and that that understanding which God has of you he brings you to in terms of understanding yourself so Paul concludes faith hope and love these abide faith which has the object in Christ hope which abides in

Christ love which comes from Christ but Paul says the greatest of these is love and somehow we've got to let that love into our lives in order that that love can be expressed through our lives and we are locked into this service of Holy Communion this morning and it's a service in which we prepare our hearts we prepare our lives we open ourselves we polish this mirror in which we see darkly and we kneel and receive in the bread and wine the evidence of the love which God has shown us in Christ and receiving that love into our lives we are prepared to love as we are loved that's the purpose and we have to find occasion to give expression to that love and that's what our life of obedience in faith is a life in which we find opportunity to give expression to that love which God has made known to us in Jesus Christ we're going to sing hymn number 475 5 hymn number 5 5 5 6 6 6 6 7 7 7 7 8 8 8 8 9 9 10 10 11 11 11 12 12 12 12 12 12 12 13 12 13 12 13 14 15 14 15 15 15 16 16 15 22 17 16 18 22 18 15 16 17 17

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