

Second Reading: 1 Corinthians 13:1-13

*<sup>1</sup>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. <sup>2</sup>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. <sup>3</sup>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.*

*<sup>4</sup>Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant <sup>5</sup>or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; <sup>6</sup>it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. <sup>7</sup>It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.*

*<sup>8</sup>Love never ends. But as for prophecies, they will come to an end; as for tongues, they will cease; as for knowledge, it will come to an end. <sup>9</sup>For we know only in part, and we prophesy only in part; <sup>10</sup>but when the complete comes, the partial will come to an end. <sup>11</sup>When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child; when I became an adult, I put an end to childish ways. <sup>12</sup>For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known. <sup>13</sup>And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love.*

After hearing today's second reading, 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians 13, you may be thinking that you're watching the wrong service – that you've somehow stumbled onto a wedding video. Let me assure you that you haven't. 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians 13 is the second reading appointed for the 4<sup>th</sup> Sunday after the Epiphany, January 30, 2022.

Now I realize 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians 13 is one of the best known passages in the Bible because of its use in weddings. It represents one of the most beautiful and poetic expressions of love in all of Scripture. I've lost track of how many weddings I've officiated at, but I think I've read 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians 13 at almost every one of them, if not all of them. It was read, in fact, at my own wedding. There is no doubt that it is beautiful, poetic, and uplifting.

But St. Paul didn't write these words for a wedding. They weren't written for a couple in love standing in front of an altar ready to pledge their lives to one another. In fact, they were written for almost the opposite situation – St. Paul wrote them to the members of the church at Corinth and that was a church that was not some kind of love fest – but it was a church in conflict.

St. Paul isn't writing to the church in Corinth to pat them on the back because of the great love they have for one another. Instead he is writing to suggest that if they are going to survive the differences and disagreements they have in their relationships with one another, then love is going to be necessary.

The church at Corinth was diverse. They weren't all the same. They were different from one another. They lived different lives, had different values, and different experiences. They had different ethnicities, genders, ages, ranks, status, and life situations. Some were married, some weren't. Some were widowed, Some had

kids. Some were converted Gentiles. Some were Jews. Some were from the lower classes, some were people of means. There were slaves and free people, as well as people with different skills sets and gifts.

This diversity was a gift. It should have been of great benefit to them and made them a strong community of faith with a wide variety of talents, abilities, and opportunities to reach out and share the good news of Jesus with all kinds of people. Unfortunately, they let their diversity divide them. They devolved into discord and rivalry. They took sides. They were broken down by difference rather than enriched. Instead of embracing their diversity, they pushed each other away.

St. Paul affirms that the God had called the church at Corinth to be diverse, but to also get along. St. Paul's call to love wasn't, as I said, celebrating the unifying love they shared. It was a call to action. It was an intervention – if you will – to instruct them on what they needed in order to be the community of faith God called them to be – to be the body of Christ in the world.

These words, from St. Paul, which make us feel so good at a wedding, probably didn't give the first hearers those same warm feelings. They may have felt a bit uncomfortable, in fact. They may have felt convicted. St. Paul's goal was to motivate them to act – to put love into action – in order to secure the church's survival into the future.

Now St. Paul wrote these ancient words to an ancient people, but I have to tell you, they seem very contemporary to me. It feels to me like God could be speaking to the situation in our congregations, our communities, our nation, and our world today. And the solution – love – is every bit the answer today as it was thousands of years ago.

St. Paul gave the people at Corinth a very practical outline of what they needed to do. I know you've heard it, but listen again, remembering this instruction for a people in conflict: "Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing but rejoices in the truth. Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never ends."

In our world today, how often at the first sign of conflict does love end? Does love stop bearing all things? How often do we stop believing others, hoping for the best, enduring along with others? How quickly do we accuse, choose sides, ridicule, blame, divide, dehumanize?

St. Augustine, the theologian who lived in the 3<sup>rd</sup> Century, was asked what love looks like. He said this, "It has hands to help others, feet to hasten to the poor and needy. It has eyes to see misery, need, and want, and ears to hear human sighs and sorrows. That is what love looks like."

As St. Augustine points out in his description, love is a verb...it is a very practical verb. St. Paul suggests intentional, clear choices that make a difference in the lives around us when we do them.

Love isn't dependent on emotion. It's not about how we feel. CS Lewis said it very clearly when he said, "Don't waste your time bothering whether you love your neighbor; act as if you did."

That's what St. Paul's words in 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians 13 are about. They are instructions on how we are to do love. They are choice we are to make in the way we interact with others.

And let's be honest. It's not easy. It's not easy to act with love towards people we may not like all that much.

Canon CK Robertson from the Episcopal Church said this: "Fifty years ago, on the first live satellite broadcast across the globe, The Beatles sang 'All You Need is Love' and then, of course, they broke up. Love, after all, is hard work."

Jesus certainly understood that. On the night of his betrayal, Jesus shared a meal with his disciples. When the meal was over, he got up from the table, took off his outer robe, poured water into a basin, got down on his hands and knees and washed his disciples feet. When he was finished and had returned to the table, he asked them if they understood what he had done to them. He explained that he had set for them an example and that they should do as he had done to them. He had shown them what loving service looked like. Later, Jesus told them that he gave them a new commandment: Love one another as I have loved you.

We know that Jesus' love was ultimate and complete. Jesus died on the cross and then rose to new life so that we might be forgiven of our sins and given the gift of new life here and now and for eternity.

There is nothing easy about choosing to love. But Jesus commands us to love one another as he loves us. St. Paul's words in 1 Corinthians 13 are a call to action. They are an intervention – if you will – to instruct us on what we need in order to be the community of faith God calls us to be – to be the body of Christ in the world. By God's grace, as we intentionally choose love, we are transformed and in the process our congregations, communities, our nation, and world is also transformed. What the world needs now is love. What we need now is love.

Thanks be to God that there is nothing in all creation that can separate us from God's love in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Amen.