

-The Greatest of These is Love-
Quinquagesima (Sunday next before Lent)
(From the Epistle: 1 Corinthians xiii.1.)

Collect: O LORD, who hast taught us that all our doings without charity are nothing worth: Send thy Holy Spirit, and pour into our hearts that most excellent gift of charity, the very bond of peace and of all virtues, without which whosoever lives is counted dead before thee: Grant this for thine only Son Jesus Christ's sake. *Amen.*

(King James Version) **1** *Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, and have not charity, I am become as sounding brass, or a tinkling cymbal. 2 And though I have the gift of prophecy, and understand all mysteries, and all knowledge; and though I have all faith, so that I could remove mountains, and have not charity, I am nothing. 3 And though I bestow all my goods to feed the poor, and though I give my body to be burned, and have not charity, it profiteth me nothing. 4 Charity suffereth long, and is kind; charity envieth not; charity vaunteth not itself, is not puffed up, 5 Doth not behave itself unseemly, seeketh not her own, is not easily provoked, thinketh no evil; 6 Rejoiceth not in iniquity, but rejoiceth in the truth; 7 Beareth all things, believeth all things, hopeth all things, endureth all things. 8 Charity never faileth: but whether there be prophecies, they shall fail; whether there be tongues, they shall cease; whether there be knowledge, it shall vanish away. 9 For we know in part, and we prophesy in part. 10 But when that which is perfect is come, then that which is in part shall be done away. 11 When I was a child, I spake as a child, I understood as a child, I thought as a child: but when I became a man, I put away childish things. 12 For now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face: now I know in part; but then shall I know even as also I am known. 13 And now abideth faith, hope, charity, these three; but the greatest of these is charity.*

(New International Version) **1** *If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal. 2 If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have a faith that can move mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. 3 If I give all I possess to the poor and surrender my body to the flames, but have not love, I gain nothing. 4 Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. 5 It is not rude, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. 6 Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. 7 It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. 8 Love never fails. But where there are prophecies, they will cease; where there are tongues, they will be stilled; where there is knowledge, it will pass away. 9 For we know in part and we prophesy in part, 10 but when perfection comes, the imperfect disappears. 11 When I was a child, I talked like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I put childish ways behind me. 12 Now we see but a poor reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known. 13 And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love.*

I noticed something remarkable about this well-known passage that has escaped me previously. It is that *charity* (or “love”), though the subject of this entire chapter, is never actually defined; it is only discussed in terms of its qualities and actions. This seems especially significant to me.

We like definitions. They help us understand the world. They represent a standard that everyone can access. A “dog”, for example, is defined as a mammal of the family Canidae, often serving as a domestic pet. A “headache” is a common physical pain usually located in the front of

the head. “Joy” is a very positive and happy human emotion. But what is “love”? This is the dictionary definition: “an intense feeling of deep affection”. It should be immediately obvious that there is a vast difference between the common definition of this word, and its meaning as used within Holy Scripture, especially as we see it in today’s Epistle. It is so large a concept for St. Paul that he cannot limit it to a simple definition. It is too wonderful, too great, to be confined to words.

Why does a discussion of love appear in the midst of this First Epistle to the Corinthians? This letter, as we noted last week, was addressed to an eminently successful church, one which could boast of many outward signs of spiritual attainment (1 Cor. 1:5). The church was alive with Pentecostal-style worship and praise and made full use of a whole range of spiritual gifts (chapters 12 & 14). They enjoyed the admiration and respect of the Christian community (4:8). But there were many cracks in this facade of apparent perfection. Among them was pride, an attitude which threatened to undo any good that the sum total of their attainments had wrought for them. Paul must bring them down to the ground, in hopes that whatever is rebuilt afterward will be something that will last forever.

The qualities that represent love are of no use for public display. Love cannot even begin to keep up with knowledge, which impresses all with its insight and immensity. It cannot compete with demonstrations of faith that bring us praise and admiration, as do acts of generosity, when improperly administered, and even grand acts of self-sacrifice, such as martyrdom. It cannot compete with them, and yet, the apostle writes, they are *nothing* without love. *Nothing?! How can this be? The most selfless acts imaginable, --meaningless-- without love?*

This should be excellent news for all of us. We tend to think that unless we can scale the highest heights of spirituality, do the greatest deeds, score the most points via the standards set by those who appear to be the most eminently successful in such things, then our little lives don’t count for much. But if we look at love as St. Paul presents it, we will see that it is utterly practical and accessible precisely where we are! It isn’t “up there”, somewhere, for only the elite to attain to --those who *move mountains*, and *understand all mysteries* and have *all knowledge*-- while the rest of us must look on longingly and despairingly. No, it is a continual and present duty, in which attainment is free and readily available. It is a limitless opportunity, and the only factor preventing us from making the most of it is... we ourselves.

Read again verses 4-8a. There is an invisibility about many of the characteristics of love, and those that are visible are certainly now showy or glitzy. Is there anything that draws attention to oneself in *not being envious*, in *not boasting*, in *not being proud*, in *not being rude*, *not becoming angered*, nor *keeping a record of wrongs* (NIV). Would such a person attract a crowd? Would they be sought for interviews? These qualities draw a yawn of boredom today from the many

who are looking for someone who asserts force, mastery, and even deviousness, insolence, and in-your-face arrogance. “Why not *delight in evil*,” they say. “It’s certainly more fun than *rejoicing in the truth*, whatever that means.” But love is not only virtually invisible. It goes down, further down, to the lowest place, where it cannot be seen at all..., but even if it could be, it would be a sight utterly unwelcome and repellent to a world constantly eying the high heights of human pride and accomplishment: Love *beareth all things, believeth all things, hopeth all things, endureth all things*. When the great stage of the world is empty and bare, and all the paying customers have departed, the lights turned off, the doors shut, love still toils unseen in humble humility, picking up the mounds of trash, sweeping the littered floors, trying to right the wrongs and heal the wounds of a world that doesn’t care, hell-bound without realizing it, making all the wrong choices, never uttering a word of gratitude for any of the good it has received.

This is the guts, if I may say it, of the “second and great commandment” that we quote every Sunday: “Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself” (Service of Holy Communion, Book of Common Prayer, p. 69, bottom). Along with loving God, it is the whole duty of the Christian, one to which he is appointed on every level of human involvement.

Charity never faileth. There is no time clock where one can “punch out” from its claim on our lives. As long as there is someone in the world other than myself, its call is upon me. There are many things that *can* fail: governments, peace treaties, oil supplies, internet systems, banks, business agreements, and health. The apostle adds to that list the *tongues, prophecy, and knowledge* which were the boast of the Corinthians. But *charity*, properly understood and practiced, cannot be among them.

Finally, St. Paul speaks mysteriously of a time of perfection when all else that has ever occupied the landscape of human endeavor will be gone, when *love*, no longer partially obscured and invisible, will shine forth as the only enduring reality that survives the passage of the world from time into eternity: *when perfection comes, the imperfect disappears*. That will be the day when the God who Himself is love (1 John 4:8, 16) will become *all in all* (1 Cor. 15:28c). It is toward this end that every inferior virtue has been made a servant. It represents for all of us a final growing up which was the goal of each and every stage through which we have passed in life: *When I was a child, I spake as a child, I understood as a child, I thought as a child: but when I became a man, I put away childish things*.

The Corinthians had made themselves content with the tools God had given them toward a higher end, as if the tools themselves were the goal. Perhaps they had grown tired of the duration and length of the journey to heaven. Instead of seeking the “real thing”, they had settled with far less. They thought they had all there was to be had, when what they possessed was at best

partial: *Now we see but a poor reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known* (NIV).

We have arrived at the last sentence of our text: *And now abideth faith, hope, charity, these three; but the greatest of these is charity.* Three virtues are left standing, once the dust of human history has settled. They represent in all their humility the greatest achievement of men. But why is charity greater even than faith, and hope? Surely because it represents the chief characteristic of the God who is love, revealed in great measure by His creation of the universe, but in an infinitely deeper manner by an act of love only dimly reflected in the best of words we can summon to describe it: *For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth on Him should not perish, but have everlasting life* (John 3:16).

Love, God's love, is too large for definition. We can begin to see its outline and fill in its form only when we see it in action. Today's text teaches us a paradox: we ourselves are defined only by our exercise of the virtues. Beyond them is no greater achievement. And the practice of love rests supreme over all of them. And love itself is shown only as it gives itself totally, repeatedly, without conditions, to another, to others, and through doing so, to God. We are defined, in other words, not by what we are, but by what we are in relation to others. And that relationship is one of the complete bestowal of ourselves in love. How wonderfully mysterious! I can hear Jesus' own words echoed here: *He who finds his life will lose it, and he who loses his life for My sake will find it* (Matt. 10:39).

So in reaching toward a definition of love, in trying to understand the apostle's words, we find ourselves with a definition of...*us*! All the world seeks for such a definition. What is a human being? Is it "a man, woman, or child of the species *Homo sapiens*, distinguished from other animals by superior mental development, power of articulate speech, and upright stance", as the dictionary says? Or is it one who through the course of a lifetime and onward into eternity, aspires toward that love which *beareth all things, believeth all things, hopeth all things, endureth all things*?

What do you think?

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.