

1 Corinthians 13.1-13; Luke 18.31-43
Quinquagesima
26 February 2017
St. John's Evangelical Lutheran Church, Topeka, Kansas

+ Iesu Iuva +

Dear fellow-redeemed: Grace be unto you and peace from God the Father and from the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

The basis for today's sermon are the Epistle and Gospel lessons.

Oremus: sint placentes sermones oris mei, meditation cordis mei in conspectu tuo, Domine fortitude mea et redemptor meus. Ps. 19.14 [15 V iuxta hebr.]

Today we're going to talk about love.

Love is probably the most misunderstood and distorted of the virtues of Scripture. I suspect that's because 1 Corinthians 13 normally gets trotted out at weddings. And then it undergoes this terrible conflation with romantic love. So that what's brought to mind when we hear this great love chapter is something more akin to a Jared ad than to what Paul's talking about. White lace and red roses instead of the hard work of...love.

And then, almost imperceptibly, "love" becomes an empty sack that we fill, instead of with God's definition, with a soppy mess of emotionalism. Even to the point that to us "love" can become and be thinking, speaking, acting in direct contradiction to the Lord's revealed will.

And there's where the danger lies. Because the heart is a fickle thing. Love isn't what we attach our emotions to. Instead, it's a hard work.

Love is a hard work, because we can't naturally love. Listen to what love does: Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

All things. Your cranky husband? Love endures him. The slight you received from your in-laws or a fellow congregant? Love bears it. The holiness of your fellow Christians through faith in Jesus, in spite of their obvious sin? Love believes it. Your ultimate rescue from the cross of your own vocation by *God*, and not by running from your vocation? Love hopes for it.

But by nature we prefer not the hard work of love, but the easy work of seeking our own interest. If you don't believe me, listen for a minute longer.

Have you been impatient with your cranky husband, wife, boss, coworker, or student in class? Then you have not love. Envious of the intellectual or material gifts of someone else or their job or their salary or their family or their sports ability? Then you have not love. Felt compelled to toot your own horn? Then you have not love. Nothing short of a jerk—arrogant and rude—to a hapless phone solicitor? Then you have not love. Are you a "my way or the highway" kind of person? Then you have not love. Gloated over the troubles of a person you don't really like very much—Hillary Clinton's failure to win the presidency, Donald Trump's missteps? Then you have not love.

Importantly, though, you shouldn't hear this as saying, "Sounds like love is impossible, so I won't try." To the contrary. You're called to a life of love. Not the emotion-ridden, emotion-driven love of popular culture. But the life of the hard work of love. The hard work of love that may even have to fight *feelings* in order to *do* what God commands and demands of you in your place in life.

If you're a student, employee, citizen. Then honor your teacher, boss, governor. Serve and obey them. Love and cherish them. That's the hard work of love.

Has the Lord blessed you to live in a family, a neighborhood, a community? Then find out what the physical needs of your neighbor are and help and support him! That's the hard work of love!

Are you single? Then lead a sexually pure and decent life in what you say and do. Are you married? Do the same. Let your heart and eye and body be for your spouse alone. That's how you love and honor your spouse in word and deed. That's love's hard work.

Has the Lord given you things and a job just like He has for your neighbor? Then help your neighbor improve and protect their possessions and their income.

Do you have tongue? Then use it well. Defend those who are slandered. Speak well of those who can't defend themselves. And don't jump to conclusions. That's the hard work of the Christian life in this world. The work of love. May the Lord give you the strength to live this life. It's not impossible.

But it would be were it not for one cardinal fact. The Lord Jesus first loved you. That's what John says: "We love because He first loved us" (1 John 4.19).

That line can seem like a guilt-trip. Don't let it. It's not. It's a statement of the way things are.

Because every existential burden has been lifted from you. The Lord Jesus has gone up to Jerusalem and everything—everything—that is written about the Son of Man by the prophets has been accomplished. He was stricken, smitten and afflicted. For you. He was made like a sheep led to the slaughter. For you. He was mocked and spat upon. For you. He was flogged, so that by His stripes you might be healed. He was killed and suffered the death and eternal death your loveless sin deserves. And on the third day He rose again. Not for Himself and for His own sake. But for you. To open to you the way to everlasting life. And He's treated every one of you like the blind man on the side of the road. He stopped. And had mercy. And just like He gave the blind man sight, He's healed you in your Baptism into His name, taken from you all your sins and death, and freed you from the devil's power. In short, He has indeed lifted from you *every existential burden*.

Now let me talk about this for a minute. Apart from Christ, you have no caring God. Paul says, "If God is *for* us, who can be against us? God, who did not spare His own Son, but gave Him up for us all, how will He not also with Him graciously give us all things?" (Rom. 8.31-32) How do you know God cares for you? Look no further than the Cross of Jesus. In fact, don't even go that far. No need to go to Jerusalem with Jesus. He does that alone. Instead, look no further than this font. Here He made yours what is His. Here He *gave* you His death and all its benefits. And His resurrection and new life. Look no further than this Altar. Here, His sacred, slain Body. For you. His holy Blood. For you, a sinner. There's no higher proof. And there's no better proof. God cares for each and every one of you so much that He gave His Son into death...for *you*. And then made it yours.

And if God has done that—and He has—then don't you think He'll take care of everything else in your life, too? He hasn't given you short end of the stick but blessed your neighbor. He hasn't ignored your temporary suffering in this sinful life. Instead, He's opened up heaven to you through the resurrection of Jesus. He's done all that. And if you don't understand that, you don't understand what kind of God you have.

The disciples in the Gospel today didn't understand what kind of God they had, either. They were still stuck in their "pull-themselves-up-by-their-own-bootstraps" theology. Blinder than blind Bartimaeus, the man on the side of the road. They were unwilling to let God be God.

You know, we often talk like that. But here Jesus puts flesh and blood on it. God wants to be God to you *in Christ*. And *in Christ*, God wants to love you by serving you. For all of your lack of love, God in Christ comes to love you. And this is how He does it: "Behold, we are going up to Jerusalem, and everything that is written about the Son of Man by the prophets will be accomplished. For He will be delivered over to the Gentiles and will be mocked and shamefully treated and spat upon. And after flogging Him, they will kill Him, and on the third day He will rise."

That's the love that God has for you. For you who grow impatient with the petty sins of others, He patiently endures the murderous sin of mankind. Where you insist on your own way, He drinks the cup of suffering given Him by His holy Father. Where you are irritable and resentful, He meekly accepts the captious accusation of His own people. Where you rejoice at wrongdoing, He weeps over Jerusalem's sin and obstinacy. Where you are arrogant and rude, He humbly accepts a burden that isn't His to carry. The sins of the world. And with it your death. And your hell.

But the disciples can't see it. They don't want to see it. They don't and don't want to understand Divine love. Don't be like them.

Instead, seeing your own lovelessness; seeing your own association of love with feeling, and where it misleads you—seeing the mess you've made of your own life and others' because of your failure to love, your divorces and broken friendships and neglected neighbors. See all of that, recognize the horrible pickle you're in. You're a sinner. A death-and-hell-bound sinner.

And repent. And with blind Bartimaeus call out, "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!" "Jesus, Son of David, do for me what I can't do for myself. Save me!"

And then hear Jesus' answer: "Behold. We are going up to Jerusalem. And everything will be accomplished." For you.

Amen.

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