



Sermon for Quinquagesima 1 Corinthians 13:1-13 & St. Luke 18:31-43

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There's a common perception that the point of Lent is to be sombre and dour—that we're supposed to spend these coming forty days depriving ourselves of the things that make us happy and give us joy. Every year I hear people groan over the fact that Lent is just around the corner. But friends, the lessons today on this last Sunday before Lent, point us in a *very different* direction. Yes, the lessons for Septuagesima reminded us that the Christian life is hard work—like a race, like a fight, and like labouring in the fields in the heat of the day. Last week's lessons, on Sexagesima, reminded us that even though we may work hard as Christians, there's nothing about our good works that we can trust in; the lessons reminded us of our unworthiness as sinners and called us to humility, because it's only by the grace of God that we can run the Christian race, fight the Christian fight, and labour on in God's vineyard. Hard work. Humility. Those sound like the typical Lenten themes that lead to groaning about Lent being around the corner. But we aren't left there. We just heard today's lessons read and they turn it all around; they tell us about love. Brothers and sisters, Lent isn't primarily about sin and death and hard work that we can't take credit for—before all those other things it's about the one thing that puts all those things in perspective—it's about love. It's about the love of the Father, who loves us so much that he wants to restore us to his fellowship despite our sins and despite our being his enemies; it's about the love of the Son—of Jesus Christ—who loves us so much that he, God, became man to suffer the death we deserve, that we might be restored to fellowship with the Father; and it's about the Holy Spirit who, as we trust in the sacrificial death of Jesus for our sins, unites us to him so that the love he embodies flows into us, fills us, and transforms us. And it's that love of God that then spills out into from us into the world. So if you tend to think of Lent as a

“downer” time of the Church year, let today's lessons serve as a reminder that the real focus of Lent is on love. I like the way Melville Scott put it:

“We are apt to think of Lent as chill, cold, and unattractive, to enter upon it without any special object, and to mark it only by increased formalities. Our Church teaches that it should rather be a season into which love should be the entrance, of which love should be the spirit, and in which the increase of love should be our great object.”

If we pay attention to what we learn from the lessons today, Lent *should* be a joyful time. Our acts of self-denial, through love, will be willing offerings. Our increased devotion will bring us greater joy. The spiritual activities that we throw ourselves into for Lent should become permanent in our lives as we grow in Christ and become more useful to him. The object of Lent is the object of the Christian life: to grow into the character of Christ and to conform to his image. Christ's ultimate characteristic is love and the more we become like our Saviour, the more we will possess and be possessed by a godly love.

In the Epistle, the first thing that St. Paul emphasizes about love is that it's critical. It is so necessary in the Christian life that without it even the greatest of spiritual gifts is worthless. Look at verses 1-3:

If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. 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 have not love, I am nothing. If I give away all I have, and if I deliver up my body to be burned, but have not love, I gain nothing.

Being eloquent is nothing without love—you can speak like an angel, but if you aren't loving, all the eloquent talk in the world is just obnoxious noise. Knowledge is pointless without love, because without love it just makes its possessor prideful. It takes love to make knowledge a blessing to others. And even the greatest faith is worthless if there's no love involved. Our faith in the redemptive sacrifice of Christ on the cross is a selfish faith if it's just fire insurance for ourselves—it should go beyond that. *Love takes our faith and directs it outward.* Knowing that Christ

can save us by his grace should also assure us that if we turn that love outward it will also bless others around us. Giving of ourselves is something we're called to do in love. God doesn't call us to give legalistically—he calls us to give in love and not to resent what he's called us to give. God loves a cheerful giver. Why? Because a cheerful giver is giving of himself, knowing that what he's giving will be a blessing. A cheerful giver is showing the character of Christ. In the Old Testament lesson, Deuteronomy 10:19, God reminded the Israelites to be charitable to others saying, “Love the sojourner therefore; *for you were sojourners in the land of Egypt.*” The point of the Israelite's rescue from slavery wasn't just that they could be a free people, but that they could share the saving power of God with others—to be a light to the gentiles. That principle carries over into the life of the Church. We aren't called to withdraw from the world—to hunker down in the Church or to circle the wagons in fear of the world. No, we're called to take the love that has brought our redemption and share it with others—to take it out into the world—that they might find the same redemption we have. St. Paul takes this spirit of loving giving all the way to martyrdom and points to Jesus. Even in death, Christ was full of love.

That covers the necessity of love, but what *is* love? How do we know it when we see it? What does it look like for us to be loving? St. Paul goes on; look at verses 4-7:

Love is patient and kind; love does not envy or boast; it is not arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice at wrongdoing, but rejoices with the truth. Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

Those verses are an indictment against all of us. How often have we all been impatient, unkind, envious, boastful, arrogant, rude. How often have we each insisted on our own way, been irritable, or resentful? How often have we found our joy in sin and in lies? St. Paul indicts us *all* with this description, because we all have the same problem. We're all sinners, but ultimately we're sinners because our hearts are corrupt and lacking in love. We don't love God the way we should and we don't love our neighbours as we should either.

When I got here on Wednesday this week I found some flyers left behind by the choir that practices in our building. They're taking part in a benefit concert aimed at creating awareness of "hate crimes". This idea of "hate crimes" has been around for a while now. The flyer specifically listed things like racism, cultural stereotyping, homophobia, transphobia, disability-related hate, and religious hate. But, brothers and sisters, *every* crime—every offence against the person or property of another person is a hate crime and simply shows up a lack of love in the perpetrator. If I break into your house and steal from you, it shows my lack of love for you just as plainly as if I were to throw derogatory comments at you because of your race or age, your sexual orientation or your religious beliefs. The two tables of the Ten Commandments sum up every form of sin and show us that every sin results from either contempt for God or contempt for man. Every sin the result of a lack of love. Every sin is a hate crime and every one of us is guilty.

Lent reminds us that we're sinners, but Lent also reminds us of the good news of the Gospel: that through Jesus Christ, God draws us back to himself. Lent remind us that God pours out his love on us and changes our hearts—makes us more loving. And yet this side of eternity, we'll never be perfected in love. So as long as we live in this world we can only experience and show love imperfectly. But that doesn't mean that we should give up. God gives us his Holy Spirit to aid us in growing more and more like him. That means growing in love. God knows that our faults have a root cause and he gives us what we need to attack that root. *We can gain all the other godly virtues by gaining just this one.* As St. Paul shows us, *through love* we get all these other virtues: the power to bear and still be kind and just as full of good will as before we were hurt; to be slow to anger; to be unsuspecting, not assuming bad intentions when we see others, but instead being glad at hearing good news and being sorry when we hear that another has fallen.

I want to pause for a minute to reflect on St. Paul's words that love "does not rejoice at wrong." The German's have a word: *Schadenfreude*. There's no English equivalent, but it describes a malicious joy

that we feel when someone else stumbles or when something bad happens to them. There's no *Schadenfreude* in the Christian life. Love is about the opposite attitude when we see others fall or others injured. Love bears or endures all things and it does not rejoice at wrong. The man or woman who loves like Christ, bears the sins of others. Some translations describe love here as a covering for the sins of others. Love allows us to overlook another person's sins. Not to say they're okay, but to let us see through the ugliness that sin creates and love that person anyway. When the sin is against us we endure or bear through that sin. We continue to love the person who has offended us because we know that we are sinners too. We've all sinned against God and against each other at one point in time. Love reminds us where each of us stands before God, knowing that it is only through his love that we can stand before him at all. As the Israelites were called to love the sojourner because they themselves had once been sojourners, the Christian is called to love the sinner just as God has shown love to us all as sinners.

Verses 8-10 remind us that this godly gift of love is eternal:

Love never ends. As for prophecies, they will pass away; as for tongues, they will cease; as for knowledge, it will pass away. For we know in part and we prophesy in part, but when the perfect comes, the partial will pass away.

For there to be an end to love would be to say that there is an end to God. God is love and all love comes from him. All these other spiritual gifts will pass away. Prophecy, tongues, knowledge, and all the other gifts of the Spirit have been given to build up Christ's Body. Right now his body is made up of people like you and me—people who are still imperfect sinners. God has to reach down and hold our hands as we toddle along in an attempt to follow him, but this imperfection will someday pass away when Christ returns. Then our redemption will be made complete. We will be remade as God originally intended us to be. But for now we continue to toddle along with Our Lord as he reaches down his hand to help us along. Look at verses 11-13:

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 ways. For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I have been fully known. So now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; but the greatest of these is love.

All these gifts that God has given us will be superseded and lost in something higher in eternity. St. Paul compares it to the way in which an adult outgrows childish reasoning and thinking. Right now the spiritual life we have, when compared to what God intends for us to have in eternity, is like a shadowy reflection in a mirror, but one day the mirror will be gone and we'll experience that spiritual reality first hand. Again, I like the way Scott puts it:

"Gifts pass, graces remain. Of graces there are three—one for each relation of life. Towards God there is faith; towards self, hope; towards others, love. Of these graces, love is the greatest; for while faith and hope appropriate, love diffuses; and the grace which gives is more blessed than those which receive. We are prepared for heaven in the same degree in which we are perfect in love, and are advanced Christians only so far as we are advanced in kindness and tenderness of heart."

Lent asks us: How well are you prepared for heaven? The only way to get there is through faith in Jesus Christ and his death for our sins, but the more we allow God to perfect love in us, the better prepared we'll be to experience the life that is waiting there for us.

The Gospel lesson today gives us a tangible, real-life illustration of what it looks like to love the way Paul describes in the Epistle. First, we see Jesus announcing to his disciples that it's time to go to Jerusalem. He knew that it was time to die—to offer himself as a sacrifice for sins. St. Luke writes:

And taking the twelve, he said to them, "See, 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 spit upon. And after flogging him, they will kill him, and on the third day he will rise."

This was a journey of love. Jerusalem was the city of the cross for him and he knew it. It was the journey that opened for us the gates of the New Jerusalem. Jesus led his disciples, going on in front of them in just the same way that he leads his faithful people today. He was faithful to make that journey to the cross and he will be faithful to lead us on our journey to salvation. He will lead us safely and ultimately to the New Jerusalem.

His sacrifice was a sacrifice of love. He knew in advance what he was getting into when he went to Jerusalem for the Passover. He knew that all the sin and shame of the world would be placed on him as he died there. But he went to the cross anyway, determined to die for those he loves, not counting the cost of his own suffering, but instead looking forward to the joy that he would see on that first Easter morning when the gates of heaven were opened.

Jesus is our example. But how often do we wimp out when it comes to doing what we know is right—because we’re afraid of what might happen to us. Sometime we just don’t want to deny ourselves. The natural, selfish urges and our weak wills override the courage that we should have as Christians. Christ’s example should renew our courage to do what is right and to do what is loving.

But notice also in the Gospel how Jesus doesn’t just pass by the beggar on the road up to Jericho. It was love that drove Christ toward the cross, but it was *also* love that made him stop along the way. He was intent and set on getting to Jerusalem, but he didn’t forget the poor beggar at the roadside. How often do we get distracted from the “lesser” callings of the Christian life because we’re so focused on a larger goal? How many pastors or evangelists have been so intent on the loving goal of doing the work of the Church and of leading men and women to Christ, that they have forgotten the duty of love they need to show to their wives and children? How many of us are so intent on the lofty goal of service in the Church, that we ignore the lost and needy people on the street we pass on the way here? How often are we so intent on being examples of good Christian character where we work, that we forget to actually share the Gospel with our co-workers,

friends, or family or ignore them when they’re in need?

The blind man in the Gospel is a symbol of all of fallen humanity. Gregory the Great wrote about him, “We know not historically who this blind man was, but we do know of what he was mystically the figure. Man verily is blind, driven out from Eden...knowing not the light of heaven, and suffering the darkness of condemnation.” The blind man shows us our own need and how we can satisfy it. He was blind and poor—poor *because* he was blind. Spiritual blindness *is* spiritual poverty. If we could only have our eyes opened! Spiritual sight is spiritual wealth. And spiritual life is ours in proportion as we see it—the blind man shows us how to meet our need. Again, Gregory writes, “Through the coming of his Redeemer, he is enlightened, so that now he already seeth by hope the gladness of inward light, and walketh by good works in the path of life.” He received faith by prayer. He heard that Jesus, the Messiah was coming by, and he knew this was his one chance. He cried out to him for help. “Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!”

Luke says that people crowding around the blind man rebuked him and told him to shut up, but he knew it was now or never. He was desperate so he cried out again and louder to Jesus, “Son of David, have mercy on me!” In his faith he persevered in spite of all the people trying to shove him to the back—and Jesus came and healed him.

Brothers and sisters, in the Lord’s Supper we are blind beggars sitting by the side of the road as Love is passing by. We cry out, “Have mercy on me.” But what do we want Jesus to do for us? We cry out: “Let me receive my sight.” But are we prepared to follow him to Jerusalem in the weeks ahead, to go with him all the way to the cross, and to rise with him to new life at Easter? Remember that to follow him as he bears his cross requires love for him. To follow him means more than just sympathy for him in his suffering and a passive acceptance of the blessings that come from his death. Jesus declared, “If any man would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me” (Matthew 16:24). He also said, “Whoever does not bear his own cross and come after me, *cannot* be my disciple” (Luke 14:27). To follow him

means to share his cross, to be crucified with him. We have to carry our own cross after him. This is the cross of self-denial. To follow him through Lent means to practice self-denial, to work to be better at self-denial, so that at Easter we can rise with Christ to a renewed life. In 2 Corinthians, St. Paul tells us: “And he died for all, that those who live might live no longer for themselves but for him who for their sake died and was raised” (2 Corinthians 5:15). To follow Christ in Lent is to run a course that will train us to be better at cross-bearing.

But a life of self-denial doesn’t end at Easter. The discipline we learn in Lent is something that should become a permanent part of our lives. This means that we have to follow Christ with seeing eyes. We’re beggars by the road as we enter Lent. We cry out, “Let me receive my sight. Let me see your great love. Help me to see the great love that compelled you to go to the cross. Teach me to love you more and more, so that I will be able to willingly bear my cross after you, O Lord.” Brothers and sisters, let us follow him to Jerusalem with seeing eyes, glorifying God by a life of self-denial and love, living not for ourselves, but for him who for our sake died and was raised and that we may draw all those around us to gather at the cross, that they might experience the love of Christ and have their eyes opened too.

And so again we pray: “Lord, you have taught us that whatever we do without love is worth nothing: send your Holy Spirit and pour into our hearts that most excellent gift of love, the true bond of peace and all virtues; for without love whoever lives is reckoned dead by you. Grant this for the sake of your only Son, Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.