



# LIVING WORD EPISCOPAL CHURCH

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## A Sermon for Quinquagesima

### 1 Corinthians 13:1-13

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This last Thursday I was making dinner and Veronica was teaching a piano lesson. I overheard her telling what, I think, must be one of her favourite stories. Mozart, so it goes, apparently had trouble getting up some mornings, so one of his servants would go to the piano and play a scale right up to the last note and then stop. The unfinished scale would so irritate Mozart that he had to get out of bed, go to the piano, and play that one last note. I think it's a musician thing, because Veronica has told me this story many, many times—usually just after I've turned off the car or TV in the middle of a piece of music.

I say this because I think it illustrates something about the nature of the kingdom of God. When Jesus came he introduced a new piece of music to his people. We might even point back to the original tune that he taught to Adam and to Eve. When their children lost the tune the Lord came and taught it again to Abraham and then to Moses and to the Israelites. It wasn't an easy tune—mostly because sinful human beings lacked the full ability to play it. And so the tune God taught Abraham and Moses was a bit like a simple melody line played on the piano with one hand. Even then Israel struggled to play it. But when Jesus came he amazed everyone by sitting down at the piano and playing the full harmony with both hands. The music took on new life. It was fuller and richer and more beautiful than anything anyone had heard since Adam's day. Some people didn't like it. Some people flat-out refused to learn it or even listen to it. But Jesus taught it to a few and each of them

taught it to a few and each of those to a few and pretty soon thousands were playing and the music was spreading all over the world. At some point someone taught it to each of us and now we're playing it.

And yet, even still, we know—or at least we *should* know—that there's more yet to come. What Jesus has taught us to play isn't the full piece of music. It's like the piano solo leading into the great orchestral piece. It gives a taste of what's to come, but to hear the full symphony we have to wait for Jesus to return—for Jesus to come back from heaven, bringing the kingdom with him in all its majesty and eternal glory. In the meantime, we play the piece he's taught us, the piece he's specially equipped us to play. And as we see in our Epistle this morning from First Corinthians, at the heart of this music Jesus has taught us—the melody of it that holds it all together and that will lead into something so much greater one day—the heart, the theme of that music is *love*.

We'll be looking this morning at 1 Corinthians 13. It's a passage of Scripture that we're very prone to understanding out of context—often because we read it out of context. We hear it read it at weddings as if what it's talking about is romantic love between husband and wife. Or parts of it is painted on pieces of home décor or stitched on throw-pillows. The result is that miss the point of the passage. What Paul says here about love comes in the middle of a discussion about the Church, about living together as the body of Christ, about spiritual gifts, and about worship. So, yes, what he describes here is about the love of husband and wife, but only because it is first and foremost about love in general, love as it should be lived out in *every* aspect of life and in *every* relationship in light of Jesus and what he's accomplished.

A few weeks ago we were reading in Romans where Paul described the

Church as being like a body, everyone gifted and equipped for a certain task, not for their own benefit, but for the benefit of the whole body. During Epiphany, not long before that, we were reading about the Church as a temple, each of us a stone, shaped and carved and cut very carefully by the Lord and all purposefully fitted together as the dwelling place of the Holy Spirit. Last Sunday we read Paul's second letter to the Corinthians. They were boasting to each other about their gifts and achievements and they'd started following teachers who boasted in their achievements—boasting as Greeks and Romans typically boasted. It was how people climbed to the top of the heap and demanded respect and honour. But in contrast Paul describes his own accomplishments: he'd been arrested, beaten, whipped, scourged, shipwrecked, cold, hungry, naked, shamed and run out of town in dishonour—all for the sake of his brothers and sisters, the very ones, in fact, who rejected him. And we think: How is this all possible? How do we live for the sake of others? How do we die to self for the sake of others? How do we sacrifice for the sake of others? The last several Sundays pointed us toward discipline and humility. Today the lessons point us to love. And so after describing the way the Church acts as a body with each using his or her gifts for the sake of others and, ultimately, for the sake of Jesus and his kingdom Paul writes:

**I will show you a still more excellent way.**

**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. (1 Corinthians 12:31b-13:4)**

It's not just about having and using gifts or about doing things in the Church. The Corinthian Church had no lack of gifts. It had no lack of activity. It had no lack of people wanting to contribute money to this cause or that cause. (One of the reasons Paul wrote to them was to raise money to support the struggling Christians in Jerusalem.) The problem in Corinth was a lack of love. Without love all the amazing things they were doing might as well have been nothing.

Back in Chapter 3 Paul used the illustration of building a temple. Like the temple in Jerusalem, it was built of carefully hewn wood, cut stones, gold, and precious jewels. Jesus is the foundation and others, like Paul and the Corinthians, were building on that foundation, but not everyone was building with stone or with gems and precious metals. Some were building with hay and straw. At the end, he says, it'll all be tested with fire. The hay and straw will go up in smoke. This is an image here that gives us a sense of what lies in store. Other passages talk of the old heaven and earth passing away and a new world being ushered in. I'm sure much of the language is figurative—the reality is at this point beyond our understanding. However it happens, though, that which is unworthy, that which is the product of sinfulness and selfishness, that which does not honour God will be consumed and will pass away, leaving a new world in which the holy, the God-honouring remains. Only the work in which people truly invested—the stone, the gold, the silver, the precious jewels—will remain. Some will make a good show of building, but if love is not their motive, it's not going to last—it will be exposed and consumed by God's judgement. If love isn't the motive, when Jesus comes and draws our music into his own great symphony, those who have been playing their own tune will have nothing to contribute.

Paul goes on in verses 5-7:

**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.**

This is what will be left. This is the melody that Jesus will take up into his great symphony. And it stands in stark contrast with the ways and values of the present age, but it stands in contrast too with the ways and values of many people in the Church. What Paul does is to hold up Jesus as our model for love.

Jesus is patient and kind. Remember, he came to condemned sinners, not to condemn, but to redeem. God has every right to leave us dead in our sins, but because he loves us he is patient and has given himself—the life of his Son—to restore us to life. Love is not envious or boastful. Think again of Jesus. He who is God humbled himself in the incarnation—again, for our sake—becoming one of us. And he came not as a great king or warrior, but as the son of a humble girl and her carpenter husband, raised in a poor backwater, and finally dying—for our sake—the humiliating and painful death of a criminal—a death we deserve, but that he did not. He had more right to boast than anyone who has ever lived, but as they pressed the crown of thorns on his head and beat him, mocking his sovereignty, he chose not to revile them in return. Instead, as he was dying he prayed for the very men who were standing there gloating and jeering at him. Love is not irritable or resentful. Again, God is patient and long-suffering. Rather than resenting us for our sins, the Lord has given himself to redeem us from them. Love does not rejoice at wrongs. Just the opposite. The angels in heaven rejoice with the Lord whenever a sinner repents. Again, think of Jesus: Love bears all

things...believes all things...hopes all things...endures all things. Has anyone borne more or endured more than Jesus?

And with that image in our heads we need to think of ourselves. Are we patient and kind? And we need to be honest. It's easy to be patient and kind some of the time and to the people we like, but what about the people we don't like? What about those difficult situations we find ourselves in? Are we *really* patient and kind? Are we envious and boastful or, like Jesus, are we humble and willing to give up our honour for the sake of others—even for the sake of people who hurt us and wrong us. Are we irritable and resentful? These are sins that Christians can be very tolerant of. Sometimes we even turn irritability and resentment into virtues when the right people and situations come our way. What's my reaction when Mormon missionaries knock on my door or when a telemarketer calls? I can be pretty irritable and most people would say that that's just fine when it comes to telemarketers and cult members. Christians can often be downright curmudgeonly when it comes to sinners and to non-Christians—and many times we even see it as a virtue. People of Jesus' day would have said something similar about tax collectors and prostitutes and gentiles, but Jesus instead forgave these people and welcomed them into the kingdom.

Again, where and how do we fall short of Jesus' model of love? In our families? In our workplaces? In our schools? In our church? And imagine the difference it would make around us if love were the driving force, the motive behind everything we do. Imagine what it would be like if we gave of ourselves, our rights, our honour, our glory the way that Jesus did.

And it sounds good, but I know it also sounds impossible. How can we ever give of ourselves the way Jesus did?

Sometimes it's hard enough giving this way to people we love. What about people who aren't close to us, people who have hurt us, people who are our enemies? This is why we need to have the example of Jesus always before us. We need to remember that *we* were his enemies. We need to remember that he owed *us* nothing but judgement, and yet he became incarnate and died for us. We need to think and meditate on the depth of love that God manifested towards us in Jesus. Brothers and Sisters, the love of God in Jesus should motivate and transform us.

But that's not all. Love is impossible, but Jesus has done more than give us an example. He's washed us of our sin and he's given us the Holy Spirit. Think back to John the Baptist. He told the people, "I've plunged you into the water, but one is coming who will plunge you into the Holy Spirit." Jesus doesn't forgive our sins and leave us in some kind of neutral state. He forgives our sins and then pours his own life into us. Remember: The Lord didn't rescue the Israelites from slavery in Egypt just to leave them wandering in the wilderness. No. He freed them from Egypt, he made them his people, and he took up his dwelling in their midst as he led them into a new home and new way of life. And just so with Jesus, but on an even grander scale. Jesus rescues us and frees us from sin and death, he makes us his people—more specifically, Paul talks about Jesus making us his own body—and he comes and dwells, not just in our midst, but actually inside us. He makes us his temple as he pours his Spirit into us. But his ultimate plan isn't just to save us, but to redeem his entire creation—to set us back on the track that Adam and Eve abandoned when they sinned. And so as Israel's destination was the promised land, our destination is the New Jerusalem, the kingdom that Jesus has promised to bring in all its fullness. That's the future, but in Jesus that future has burst into our present. In the Holy Spirit Jesus gives

us a foretaste of what is to come. He invites us play the music of the kingdom and the music of the kingdom is love.

Again: If it's not driven by love, it won't last. And Paul drives this point home in the rest of the passage. It's not just that the things we do without love will go up in smoke when the kingdom finally comes in all its fullness, but even many of the good things Jesus calls us to do will be overwhelmed by the great theme of love. Look at verses 8-13:

**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. 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.**

First Corinthians give us the distinct sense that the church in that city was fixated on certain miraculous gifts, especially prophecy and tongues, not only elevating those who had these gifts above others, but emphasizing to everyone that these gifts were sort of the end-all-be-all of Christianity. Forget everything else—put it all aside—and pursue prophecy and tongues! But Paul is warning them and saying, "No. These gifts are great and they're useful, but there's something far more important: cultivate love. If you want to build the kingdom, don't pursue gifts. If you've got them, use them—*lovingly*—but pursue love above all else. When the kingdom is here and we're all living in God's presence, there will no longer be any need of prophecy, but there

will be a need for love. The same goes for tongues. Who needs tongues when the curse of Babel is done away with? But we'll still need love.

Paul describes it in terms of growing from a child into an adult. Think of all the toys we give to babies to help them develop hand-eye coordination, to learn language skills, to socialize them. But then they grow up and they no longer need those things—in part because those things helped them to develop into healthy adults. In the present age our view of God is dim. Paul describes it in terms of an ancient mirror made of polished metal. The reflection was imperfect and dark. And so is our view of God. Even as redeemed men and women, our vision of God is clouded by sin. And yet one day we will stand before him face to face. We'll know him not only through the mediating words of Scripture or through the mediating work of the Holy Spirit, but we'll stand before him and know him face-to-face.

And it's on that day that our music will be taken up into God's great symphony and all that will remain is love. Faith, hope, and love remain, he says—they're critical to our life as the Church, as the people of God today—but above all we need to learn to love. It's not that faith and hope aren't important. They're vital, but without love—they'll be out of tune with God's symphony. We live by faith. We take hold of Jesus, the forgiveness of sin and the promise of life, and we take hold of him by faith as we trust in him. We submit to his lordship by faith. And we live in hope—living for a kingdom and a world for which we have only a down payment. But on the great day when Jesus returns and the kingdom is consummated, faith will vanish into sight, hope will be fulfilled, but love will only intensify, growing greater and more profound as we see our Lord face to face and the weight of sin and death is finally and fully lifted from us—as the blurry image of the mirror is replaced by the

real thing—as our simple chopsticks-like tune of love on the piano is taken up as part of the Lord’s grand symphony of love.

Brothers and Sisters, think of the words of the Lord’s Prayer: “Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.” We pray these words so often and know them so well that we easily forget what they really mean. This is a prayer that looks forward in faith and hope to the day when we will see him face to face; this is a prayer that looks forward to the day when we have grown from little children into adults; this is a prayer that looks forward to that day when love becomes Creation’s all-consuming theme. The Lord’s Prayer *looks forward* to that day in hope and faith, but what it asks for is that this theme of love be manifested here *today*. It asks in faith for love to be made known today in the midst of sin and of fear and of hate and of death. And, Brothers and Sisters, that means that it’s a prayer for our own hearts and minds to be transformed by the Holy Spirit, because if anyone is to manifest love in this present age, it is us, the only people in this world who know first-hand the love of Jesus. So pray, “thy will be done, on earth as in heaven” and pray those words in hope of the coming kingdom and pray those words in faith, trusting and seeking for the Lord to give you his loving heart so that you can show his love in your church, in your family, in your workplace, in your school, in your community, and in your world.

Let us pray: O 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 of all virtues; without which whoever lives is counted dead before you. Grant this for the sake of your only Son, Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. *Amen.*