

Sermon for February 3, 2013 – 4th Sunday after Epiphany

1 Corinthians 12:27-13:13

Theme: Christian Love

²⁷ Now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it. ²⁸ And in the church God has appointed first of all apostles, second prophets, third teachers, then workers of miracles, also those having gifts of healing, those able to help others, those with gifts of administration, and those speaking in different kinds of tongues. ²⁹ Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Are all teachers? Do all work miracles? ³⁰ Do all have gifts of healing? Do all speak in tongues? Do all interpret? ³¹ But eagerly desire the greater gifts. And now I will show you the most excellent way. 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.

Arguments, gossiping, selfish pride, offending and being offended . . . are these the marks of the Christ's church? Are these the fruits of the Spirit? An outsider visiting the Paul's congregation in Corinth might have been led to think so – based on the way the Corinthians were acting.

As we will learn today, these are certainly not the marks of the healthy congregation. The mark of a healthy congregation is the love we show each other - as Jesus himself said: ³⁴ "A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. ³⁵ By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another." (John 13:34-35)

What does it mean to love each other the way Christ has loved us? Where do we find the help to do this? These are the questions we hope to answer this morning under the theme: **Christian Love.**

Our sermon text for today is taken from Paul's first letter to His congregation in Corinth. The Lord had richly blessed them with many spiritual gifts. They had the potential of being a congregation alive in faith and service to God. However, after Paul left Corinth, selfishness and pride moved in. Members started to boast about who had baptized them. They boasted about their knowledge. They boasted about their spiritual gifts. They took pride in themselves instead of in Christ. They started to use their gifts to tear each other down, rather than build each other up.

But this was not the way it should be. God had blessed the Corinthians with a variety of gifts to serve and benefit each other – not to be used selfishly. This is why he reminds them:

²⁷ Now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it. ²⁸ And in the church God has appointed first of all apostles, second prophets, third teachers, then workers of miracles, also those having gifts of healing, those able to help others, those with gifts of administration, and those speaking in different kinds of tongues. ²⁹ Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Are all teachers? Do all work miracles? ³⁰ Do all have gifts of healing? Do all speak in tongues? Do all interpret?

God has given different kinds of gifts to the Church. Paul lists gifts that deal with the proclamation of His Word with "first, second, third," but then, when talking about other gifts (even the flashy ones like miracles and speaking in tongues) he lumps them all together. Paul does this for a reason. The greater gifts that are to be desired are not the flashy gifts of speaking in tongues and performing miracles; but rather those gifts that have to do with understanding and teaching His Word. It is only through the spreading of the Word that the Church grows and is strengthened. The ability to read, understand and speak the Gospel is a gift God wants all of us to desire, and a gift that He freely offers when we pray for it and use the Word that He gave us.

This is why Paul writes: ³¹ *But eagerly desire the greater gifts. And now I will show you the most excellent way.* What is the “excellent way” Paul is showing us? He is showing us two things: the manner in which we are to desire the greater gifts of handling his Word, and also the manner in which we are to use all the gifts God has given us. That manner is love.

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.*

Paul’s point is this: even if you had really flashy gifts like speaking in tongues, the gift of understanding everything God’s Word said, and the ability to give up all your possessions . . . all of these abilities are absolutely worthless if you don’t have love. What good is it if people see you and say, “Wow, what a super-Christian!” Without love, we are nothing - we are just a pretty picture that people can look at. Love is the essence of who God is. (1 John 4:8). Love is the reason God saved us, and to show love is the purpose God gives us for our lives (John 15:12-17); as the Scriptures say: *Be imitators of God, therefore, as dearly loved children ² and live a life of love, just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God (Ephesians 5:1-2).*

“But,” we might think, “don’t we all love each other already? I mean, I never try to hurt anyone. Sure, I don’t really like so-and-so over there. He offended me a few years back. God knows that if I actually talked to him, I would probably blow up. True, I generally just try to avoid him, but I avoid him in love.”

Brothers and sisters is Christ: that is not love. What is love? Listen to how Paul describes it, and let us also add how Lord exemplifies it!

Love is patient. It means bearing with people who sin against us, just as the Lord himself bears with us, as the Scriptures say: *The Lord . . . is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance (2 Peter 3:9).*

Love is kind. It means doing things for the benefit of others, even if they anger us by what they do. This is what the Lord did for us, as the Scriptures say: ³ *At one time we too were foolish, disobedient, deceived and enslaved by all kinds of passions and pleasures. We lived in malice and envy, being hated and hating one another. ⁴ But when the kindness and love of God our Savior appeared, ⁵ he saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy. (Titus 3:3-5a).*

[Love] does not envy. Love does not covet the good things God has blessed our fellow Christians with. It is content and humbles itself in the presence of others, just as the Jesus humbled himself for us: *Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. (Philippians 2:5-7)*

[Love] does not boast, it is not proud . . . it is not self-seeking. Love does not say, “look at me,” rather it says: “look at Him. Look at Jesus.” Love means building your neighbor up, not tearing him down. In the Church we seek to glorify each other, not ourselves, just as God the Father sought to glorify His Son, and the Son His Father. Jesus say: *"If I glorify myself, my glory means nothing. My Father, whom you claim as your God, is the one who glorifies me. (John 8:54)*

[Love] is not rude. Love does not seek to offend others – even when we feel we have a right to be rude. Consider Jesus on trial before the High Priest. Humanly speaking, Jesus had every right to be rude to him and his farce of a trial, but – instead – Jesus witnessed to truth in love, showing respect.

[Love] is not easily angered. Love means not flying off the handle just because you think you have a right to do so. Love forgives the wrongs others commit against us, as Jesus did, when He prayed from the cross: *"Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing (Luke 23:34).*

[Love] keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not say, “I don’t trust you because I remember when you did this or that.” Love forgives as God forgave us, as He said: *"For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more." (Jeremiah 31:34)*

Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. Love does not take pleasure in gossiping about the problems of others and try to get the latest scoop on what bad things someone else did. Love takes pleasure in the things that are good, admirable and lovely. Love rejoices in the teaching of Jesus, as He himself encourages: *"If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples."³² Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free."* (John 8:31-32)

[Love] always protects, the good name and reputation of the members of the congregation. It prays for others, as Jesus prayed for his disciples: *that [God] protect them from the evil one* (John 17:15).

[Love] always trusts that God will keep his promises. It always gives your fellow Christians the benefit of the doubt. Jesus exemplified this kind of love when he entrusted the message of spreading the Gospel to forgiven sinners like us, as St. Paul says: *Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners-- of whom I am the worst.* ¹⁶ *But for that very reason I was shown mercy so that in me, the worst of sinners, Christ Jesus might display his unlimited patience as an example for those who would believe on him and receive eternal life* (1 Timothy 1:15-16).

Love always hopes. It does not consider anyone a lost cause – just as Jesus himself exemplified in the parable of the unfruitful tree, where He pleads to the land owner: ⁸ *"Sir, leave it alone for one more year, and I'll dig around it and fertilize it. ⁹ If it bears fruit next year, fine! If not, then cut it down."* (Luke 13:8-9)

Loves always perseveres. It does not give up on someone. It does not let the evil it experiences from others keep it from doing its work. Love keeps on going, as Jesus kept on going to the cross and kept on suffering for us in spite of our continual sins against him.

Love never fails. Love is not only the means to the end, it is the end itself, therefore it never fails. Even if the person we love continually rejects it, it still hasn't failed, just as the love God showed the world by sending His Son did not fail – even though many people do not believe it. Every sin is paid for. All who repent and believe the Gospel of God's love will be saved.

Jesus commanded us *Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another.* ³⁵ *By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another."* (John 13:34-35) Having learned what it means to love, can any of us claim that we truly love each other? If anyone does make this claim, they lie.

We have not and cannot love as God desires. But Jesus loved us. In love he paid for all our sins by his life, death and resurrection. Through the Gospel He has given us His Spirit to create faith in our hearts; and in His Spirit we strive to show this love to one another as we use the gifts God has given each of us for the benefit of the Church.

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.*

All the spiritual gifts that God has given us, glorious, as they might seem, are actually temporary. They are not the ends in and of themselves, but the means. The working of miracles and speaking in tongues were not the things the Corinthian Church were to be proud of, rather God's love to us and through us is the thing that lasts.

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.*

We are still imperfect and long for the day when our faith, hope, knowledge and love will be perfected. Now we are like children, but we are growing in the grace and knowledge of God. Now we see the glory of God only partially, but soon we will see him face to face, and know him as we are known by him.

And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love. Why is love the greatest of the three that remain? Because faith grabs hold of God's promises and trusts. Hope is the certain future we look forward to. But love is both the cause, means and goal of everything that God has done for us, and is the cause in us for all that we do for Him. *"We love because He first loved us* (1 John 4:19)".

Members of Immanuel, my brothers and sisters in Christ. Be imitators of God and love each other the way God himself loves you. This is what Christian love is all about, and by this we show ourselves to be true children of God. Amen.