

The Fourth Sunday of Ordinary Time

(Year C)

<i>First Reading</i>	Jeremiah 1:4-5, 17-19
<i>Response</i>	My mouth will tell of thy righteous acts, of thy deeds of salvation all the day
<i>Psalms</i>	Psalms 71:1-2, 3-4, 5-6, 15-17
<i>Second Reading</i>	1 Corinthians 12:31—13:13
<i>Gospel Acclamation</i>	[H]e has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives
<i>Gospel</i>	Luke 4:21-30

The fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time for year C continues our journey through Paul's first letter to the Corinthians and brings us to what is arguably the most famous chapter in all of Paul's letters — and certainly the most famous chapter in his letter to the Corinthians, and that is the chapter on love: 1 Corinthians 13.

So the reading for today, significantly, does not begin, however, with chapter 13 verse 1. It backs up to chapter 12, verse 31, which is the introduction to this chapter... which can rightly be called the chapter on “the way of love” or “the path of love.” So let's begin with 1 Corinthians 12:31, and we'll go down to chapter 13, verse 13. Again, this is a long reading. If you've been to a Catholic wedding, you have probably heard it more than once, because it is the most popular reading for the Sacrament of Matrimony when people choose the second reading. And it is just a classic text. So we're not going to be able to do justice to it, but we will do our best to give a few insights. So here's how it begins, chapter 12, verse 31.

Immediately after describing various charismatic gifts in chapter 12, Paul says this:

But earnestly desire the higher gifts.

And 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 my body to be burned, but have not love, I gain nothing.

Love is patient and kind; love is not jealous or boastful; it is not arrogant or rude. Love does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice at wrong, but rejoices in the right. Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

Love never ends; as for prophecies, they will pass away; as for tongues, they will cease; as for knowledge, it will pass away. For our knowledge is imperfect and our prophecy is imperfect; but when the perfect comes, the imperfect 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 understand fully, even as I have been fully understood. So faith, hope, love abide, these three; but the greatest of these is love.¹

I feel the burden of trying to explicate what is such a sublime passage. It really... you really almost want to just stop and not have any commentary and let the words kind of wash over you, because they're so perfect and they're so inspired. But I'll do my best to hopefully give you a few insights into it.

So the first thing I would want to say here is that the whole chapter on love takes place in the context of Paul having just enumerated all of the various charismatic gifts — like wisdom and knowledge and prophecy and speaking in tongues and performing miracles — and drawing a contrast of sorts between those gifts of the Holy Spirit and the *higher* spiritual gifts of faith, hope, and love, the greatest of which is love.

So as you're reading through this chapter, I'd invite you to go back through and look again at chapter 12, because the reason Paul refers to mysteries of knowledge

¹ Unless otherwise indicated, all Bible citations/quotations herein are from *The Holy Bible: Revised Standard Version, Catholic Edition*. New York: National Council of Churches of Christ in the USA, 1994.

and wisdom and faith and prophecy is because he's alluding to what he's just said about the charismatic gifts... because he's trying to make sure the Corinthians don't give into the temptation to strive after lower gifts — like speaking in tongues and performing miracles — while ignoring the greatest of all the charismatic gifts, which is the gift of love, the virtue of charity. That's the first point.

The second thing is that when Paul says:

And I will show you a still more excellent way.

He's describing a path of love. He's describing a habit of virtue. He's not just talking about love in the abstract. He's actually using the word “way” or *hodos* — which is the same Greek word for a path — to describe a life of virtue. So he's trying to teach the Corinthians not just what love is in the abstract, but how to live it in the practical, how to live a life of love in the concrete.

So whenever you see that word “way” used in the New Testament (*hodos*), I almost wish it would be translated as a path, because when you use the imagery of a path, it implies a journey — that I'm on a journey. I'm making progress from one point to another. I'm moving from one destination to another. And here, what Paul is describing is literally the path or the way of love... the way of love.

In fact, it's interesting.. In Greek, although the English suggests the comparative:

And I will show you a still more excellent way.

The Greek is actually in a superlative: “I will show you the most excellent way”, “the most excellent path.” That's the path of charity. Literally in Greek, it's *kath' hyperbolēn hodon*. I'm going to show you the hyperbolic path, in other words — literally, that's what he's saying. The greatest, the most exalted of all paths is the path of love, the path of *agapē*.

You'll see the Jewish Scriptures, they use this imagery of a path all the time, like in the book of Psalms:

Blessed is the man
who walks not in the counsel of the wicked,
nor stands in the way of sinners...

... but he walks in the path of righteousness. So this imagery of walking down a path is a standard Jewish way of referring to growth and virtue in the spiritual life. So this is a very crucial text for the spiritual life.

Now with that said, then, the path — the most excellent path he's going to show them is about love. And as soon as we even say that word in English, we run into a problem, because the word "love" in English can mean so many different things that it's often confusing when we try to bring that plethora of meanings to the text of 1 Corinthians and read it in light of it.

Because for example, in ordinary English, we will often use the word "love" for as exalted a reality as loving God with all our hearts, soul, mind, and strength, and as low of a reality as "I love ice cream." And everything in between loving ice cream and loving God — we use the word in all those different ways. So it's important, at least in a preliminary way, to try to define what Paul means by this. So in order to do this, it's important to realize that in ancient Greek — in the Greek that Paul is writing in — there are at least four different terms that get translated into English as "love." So let me just walk you through them for just a moment.

First — the first word is *storgē*. *Storgē* is a term that can be translated as affection. It's often used to describe the affection between parents and children. And although it can be used of erotic love, it isn't usually. Normally it's just the lowest form of love, just a basic affection. You'll sometimes see it used to describe the affection of a human being, for example, for a pet or domestic animal. *Storgē* — that's affection.

The second Greek word for love is *erōs*. This one is easier to understand. This is used to describe erotic love or desire as that between a man and a woman, between a husband and a wife. It's interesting — *erōs* is never used in the New Testament, so that's not the word Paul is using here. He's not using *storgē* (affection), and he's not using *erōs* (erotic love).

A third Greek word that gets translated as love is *philia*. Now *philia* is the love between friends. For example, you'll see this in English — philadelphia. That's literally — it's the city of brotherly love. *Philos* means love or friendship, and *adelphos* means brother. So this is the love you'll see between friends or between siblings. It usually means love between equals, like equal partners... like in a friendship.

And then finally, the fourth term that is used for love is the one that Paul is using here, and that is the word *agapē*. Now again, it's very difficult to kind of sum up the word *agapē* in one definition, because it has a range of meanings, even in the Greek text in which it's utilized. But if I had to define it, I would say that *agapē* at its heart can be used to refer to willing the good for another person, especially by making a gift of oneself to the other — a total gift of self. You see this especially in the book of Deuteronomy, in the *shema*. When the Greek translation of Deuteronomy says:

...and you shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might. (Deuteronomy 6:5)

...that total gift of self to God — it doesn't use the word *storgē*. It doesn't use the word *erōs*. It doesn't use the word *philia*. It uses the word *agapē*... or the verb *agapaó*. So that's the kind of love that Israel is being called to love God with, to make a gift of themselves to God.

And likewise, God, when He says to love His people, He's going to choose the good for them. He's going to protect them. He's going to care for them. He's going to want to draw Him to Himself in this intimate relationship, which is sometimes described as spousal — God as the Bridegroom, Israel as His bride. So we'll sometimes see *agapē*, this word used to describe the love between spouses, like in the Song of Solomon. In its Greek translation, the word gets used there.

So the word Paul is using here in 1 Corinthians 13, whenever he's talking about the higher spiritual gifts and the way of love, is the way of *agapē*. Now, as soon as I say that, it's important to remember, those definitions are a helpful taxonomy, a

kind of ordering, making some distinctions of the kind of different nuances that the word love can have in Greek.

But if you want to really understand how Paul is defining love here in 1 Corinthians 13, you can't just look at the word *agapē*. You have to look at the actual description of love that he gives in the subsequent verses, because he's going to define it for you precisely by painting a portrait of what *agapē* is and what it is not... what love is and what it isn't. And in this section, it's really important to recognize that when Paul defines love — although in our English translation we have adjectives — in every case, Paul is actually using the verb. So he's not just telling you what love is like or what it is, he's telling you what it does and what it doesn't do.

This is very important, because again, in contemporary English, we tend to think of love primarily as a feeling or an emotion, but Paul is very clear that love here is an action that chooses to do certain things and chooses not to do other things. So with that basic framework in mind, let's ask: what is *agapē*? That's the Greek — or Latin, *caritas*. What is charity? What does charity do, and what does charity not do? Here's what Paul says:

Love is patient and kind...

...or it does patience. Love is kind... or does kindness, would be a kind of more concrete, literal Greek translation. Love rejoices... Here we see it more clearly, the verbs... the verbs are in English.

...but rejoices in the right.

Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.
Love never ends...

So that's what love is. Beautiful there.

You can even see some of the virtues kind of flow through of faith and hope. Faith being it "believes all things." So why do I believe everything that God says to me

in the Scriptures? Ultimately, because I love Him. Why do I hope for the good of the resurrection and life everlasting in the world to come? Well, because I hope in God, because I love Him.

So hope and faith here, Paul is rooting ultimately in *agapē*. Patience, being patient, being kind — all those things flow out of *agapē*. Now what about what love is not? He continues. On the other hand:

... love is not jealous...

...or doesn't do jealousy. I don't do jealously.

... love is not jealous or boastful; it is not arrogant or rude.

Again, put these in verbs. It doesn't do arrogance. It doesn't do rudeness.

Love does not insist on its own way...

There we see willing the good for the other, is an act of love — dying to self and choosing the other. Love doesn't insist on its own way.

...it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice at wrong...

So in this parallel — this set of contrasts between what love is and what it isn't — there we see an emerging portrait of what the way of love actually looks like and what living a life of love looks like.

And there was a wonderful book that came out on this. Ceslaus Spicq — he was a Catholic Biblical scholar in the 20th century. He wrote a three volume work on *agapē* in the New Testament — classic work on love in the New Testament. And in his book on love, he says something interesting. He says if you want to understand Paul's kind of portrait of love, one of the things you can do is you can replace the word *agapē* with the name Jesus. And you'll see that what you get is a portrait of the life of the Savior. Let me just do this for a second to kind of give you an idea.

So Jesus is patient. Jesus is kind. Jesus is not jealous or boastful. He's not arrogant or rude. He doesn't insist on His own way. He's not irritable or resentful. He doesn't rejoice at wrong but rejoices in the right. Jesus bears all things. He believes all things. He puts His trust in the Father. He hopes all things. He endures all things. What does He endure? He endures the cross.

So you see this powerful portrait of the charity of Christ emerging in Paul's description of *agapē*. It's very similar to the Beatitudes. Some scholars — Pope Benedict, for example — has pointed out that the Beatitudes are a kind of profile of Jesus Himself, the same thing true here with the love chapter. It's a kind of profile of the One who is the living love of God made manifest, made in the flesh through the Incarnation.

Now that's a beautiful way to kind of reflect and meditate on this passage. However, a good friend of mine also gave me another suggestion with this that might be helpful to you, which is to use the same verses in St. Paul on *agapē*. And instead of putting Jesus' name in it, put your own name in it as a way of examining your conscience.

So sometimes it can be easy to examine your conscience, for example, according to the Ten Commandments and come out looking pretty good. I haven't committed adultery, I haven't murdered anyone, haven't worshipped any cows lately — I haven't committed idolatry. I'm looking pretty good.

But put your name in Paul's portrait of *agapē* and see how am I doing in terms of my growth in virtue. And I hesitate to do this, because I'm going to have strike one right in the beginning. Brant is patient. Oh...no. Brant is kind. Brant is not jealous or boastful. Brant is not arrogant or rude.

Okay, wow. Now as soon as you start to do this, you'll see, I have a long way to go along the path of love. Has rudeness been rooted out of my life? Has resentfulness been rooted out of my life? Am I patient? Am I kind to others? Do I insist on my own way? Am I irritable? Am I resentful? Am I boastful? Do I rejoice when I see wrongs carried out, when I see other people hurting or in pain or getting what's coming to them? If I do rejoice at the wrong rather than in the right, if I fail to bear

all things or believe all things or hope all things or endure all things, guess what? I still have a long way to go on the way of *agapē*, on the way of love. This is a powerful, beautiful, absolutely essential text for growth in the spiritual life.

Okay, so little aside there, but hopefully it'll be helpful for you to kind of...because we don't want to leave this chapter in the abstract. It's not an abstraction that Paul is speaking of here. It's a concrete reality about a particular path to growth in virtue that is embodied by, in the most perfect way, Jesus Christ Himself.

Okay, so he brings the hymn to an end here by highlighting the fact that out of all of the spiritual gifts and all of the virtues themselves, including faith and hope, that love is the greatest of them all. Why? Because:

Love never ends; as for prophecies, they will pass away; as for tongues, they will cease; as for knowledge, it will pass away. For our knowledge is imperfect and our prophecy is imperfect; but when the perfect comes, the imperfect will pass away.

And then he gives this beautiful analogy. He says:

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.

Many of you who are parents out there, you know what this is talking about here. Sometimes we can look back at our own childhood and forget just how foolish we were and how irrational that we were and how ignorant we were. But when you have children, you'll be reminded of that very quickly on a regular basis — that kids don't think the same way adults do. They have to grow in their understanding and in wisdom.

And what Paul is saying here is that when we're spiritually children, we get all excited about really extraordinary gifts, like prophecy or knowledge or tongues or miracles... but that the spiritual mature person is going to recognize that while all

those things are good, the highest gift of all is *agapē*, is love, is charity. And he says:

For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall understand fully, even as I have been fully understood.

Here Paul is basically giving a classic window into the nature of eternal life. What is eternal life? It is the vision of God, being able to see God face to face. And if you look at the contemplative writers throughout the spiritual tradition, this is going to be their description of contemplative prayer.

Ultimately, contemplative prayer is a... the *Catechism* says a silent gaze of love between the soul and God, which itself is a kind of foretaste of eternity. Paul here is trying to help the Corinthians understand that ultimately what they should be striving for is a spiritual maturity that is focused on *agapē* as a kind of foretaste of what they will do forever in eternal life — see God and love God face to face. And then he concludes:

So faith, hope, love abide, these three; but the greatest of these is love. (1 Corinthians 13:13)

Now why is love the greatest? Well, because think about it... there's an imperfect or impartial dimension to both faith and hope. In faith, I believe to be true that which I cannot confirm to be true through some kind of evidentiary proof. In hope, I look forward to a future reality that I don't yet taste fully. So faith, I believe in something unseen. Hope, I long for something unexperienced or unseen or that has not yet been realized.

So once eternal life comes, Paul is saying here, I'm not going to see in a mirror dimly. I'm not going to wait for something that hasn't been consummated or fulfilled. I'm going to see clearly, face to face, and I'm going to obtain those things for which I hoped.

So there's a sense in which faith and hope, in their current form, pass away. But love doesn't. And in that sense, the greatest of the three theological virtues — faith,

hope, and love — is love. Because as Thérèse says in her *Story of a Soul*, because love is eternal... or as Paul himself says, because love never ends.

And so speaking of Thérèse, I'll end with one more quote from her. So in *The Story of a Soul*, Thérèse's biography — autobiography — again, just as 1 Corinthians 12 played a key role in her own understanding of her vocation being to love, so too 1 Corinthians 13 helped her realize that this was the most excellent way.

So we all talk about Thérèse's little way of love — maybe you've heard that, her little way of spiritual childhood of performing small actions but with great charity. Where did St. Thérèse get her little way of love from? She gets it from St. Paul. She gets it from 1 Corinthians. Listen to St. Thérèse's words:

During my meditation, my desires caused me a veritable martyrdom, and I opened the Epistles of St. Paul to find some kind of answer. Chapters 12 and 13 of the First Epistle to the Corinthians fell under my eyes... I continued my reading and this sentence consoled me: "Yet strive after THE BETTER GIFTS, and I point out to you a yet more excellent way" [1 Cor 12:31; 13:1]. And the Apostle explains how all *the most PERFECT gifts are nothing without LOVE. That Charity is the EXCELLENT WAY that leads most surely to God.*²

St. Thérèse's *Story of a Soul*, chapter 9. Notice, Thérèse didn't even need to know Hebrew to know that when Paul talked about the way of love, he was talking about the path, the most excellent path that leads to God.

And the reason she knew this is because she knew the Scriptures, she knew the psalms. She knew the way the Bible used the language of "the way." And this is only one of several passages in her biography where she talks about the little way of love or the little way of spiritual childhood. And I just would like to close by making two points about that. First, although we all tend to associate the little way of spiritual childhood or the little way of love with Thérèse, Thérèse herself didn't make that up. She wasn't the first to come up with it. In fact, if you go back to

² St. Thérèse, *Story of a Soul*, Chapter IX

another spiritual classic, one of my favorites of all time, Saint... I almost said St. Thomas à Kempis, but he's not a saint. He has not been canonized, so just Thomas à Kempis — his work *The Imitation of Christ* from the 15th century.

This was one of Thérèse's favorite books. She had many parts of *Imitation of Christ* memorized, and she read it frequently and meditated on it in addition to the Gospels and the Scriptures. And so in the *Imitation of Christ*, in book 1 chapter 15, listen to these words and tell me if this sounds like St. Thérèse:

Without charity a good work profits nothing (1 Cor 13:3), but *whatever is done with charity, no matter how small and insignificant, is always fruitful*. God pays more attention to the amount of love and affection with which a person performs a work than how much he actually does.³

Beautiful.

So Thomas à Kempis is saying there, whatever is done with love, no matter how small it is, is fruitful... and that God ultimately pays attention to not how great our works are but how much love we do them with.

And of course, Thomas à Kempis — where does he get that from? He gets it from St. Paul. So what we see here is a tradition in the Church that is taught by Thérèse (a Doctor of the Church), goes back to Thomas à Kempis (one of the most influential spiritual writers in the west), who ultimately got this teaching on love from St. Paul himself.

So the whole history of how 1 Corinthians 13 has impacted the Church is really indescribable. If there is any chapter in the letters of Paul that has been a saint maker, it is the hymn to love in 1 Corinthians 13.

³ Thomas à Kempis, *The Imitation of Christ*, 1.15; trans. M. Nazarene Prestofillipo, F.S.P.