



“Let’s Talk of Love”

I Corinthians 13
31 January 2010
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Perhaps this meditation would have more effect, or at least be more timely in a couple of weeks. Perhaps it would better fit around February 14, Valentine’s Day. But the lectionary and circumstances have dictated that we take a look at

Paul’s chapter on love today, in the middle of Epiphany, that period in the church’s year in which we look at revelations of Jesus’ presence among us.

Consider what we do in Epiphany: We celebrate the arrival of the magi, who followed their star to encounter the One who would be more than a political king.

We remember the baptism of Jesus, which reveals to us another form of our commonality with the Savior. We consider the prophetic word and its summation of the ministry to which he is called:

*... bring good news to the poor.
... to proclaim release to the captives
and recovery of sight to the blind,
to let the oppressed go free,
to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.”*

giving us a hint of the direction of our own ministry and mission in which we serve as foils to reveal Christ to the others and the world.

But what is the driving force behind our pilgrimages in following our stars? What is the basic element that engages us in a relationship with God through Christ?

What is the force which drives the prophetic vision to which we are called.

I would submit to you this morning that it is none other than that element which we call “love,” as it is expressed in Paul’s epistle to the Corinthians. Yet this love while a part of it, is far from the syrupy sentimentality that infects the kind of love of which we speak around February 14. Indeed, love is an emotion that is a response to other sentimental expressions which have arisen in the Corinthian Church. Perhaps you recall Chapter 12’s “gifts of the Spirit?” Paul lists them, and does so in this order:

first apostles,
second prophets,
third teachers,

and then we could add 4th, 5th, 6th, 7th, & 8th: deeds of power, gifts of healing, forms of assistance, forms of leadership, various kinds of tongues.

What is a list? Isn’t it little more than a hierarchy? An ordering of the importance of related items, with the most crucial at the top or first, followed by the second, third, and so on.

Well, one of the things that was causing problems to the Corinthians was the ordering of the spiritual gifts: they seemed to have taken the last in the list and made it first.

Paul doesn't berate the gift, instead he puts it in its place by describing the attributes of what he considers to be the ultimate of the gifts of the spirit: love; "I will show you a still more excellent way." Starting at the bottom he begins:

"If I speak in the tongues of mortals and angels, but do not have love...

"If I have prophetic powers...

"If I have faith....

"If I give away my possessions, and if I hand over my body

but do not have love, addresses all these gifts and their level of power, without love's influence. It is nothing. In other words, all the spiritual gifts in the world, all the good deeds, all the "charity" without love, are empty, null, and void.

I remember a story that was told by one of the actors in the long-running Broadway Musical, "A Chorus Line." You might remember that one of the hit songs from that musical is "What I did for love." The song expressed that the dancers on the chorus line, the lowest paid of Broadway's performers, do what they do "for love." The actor reported that so many people were telling them how much that song meant to them because it spoke to what *they* did. And "*they*" were accountants, doctors, teachers, construction workers, postal employees, plumbers etc, etc. At first the actor didn't understand. This was a song about the theater, the chorus line, about commitment to the life of an actor and the craft of an actor and the trials and rewards of being an actor; but then she realized, that "doing for love" was not, could not, be limited to the theater.

"Doing something for love" could happen in any context; in construction work, in medicine, in education, in law, even in theology. Then her singing of the song in that musical began to have a purpose, because she was singing for *everyone* out there who did what they did for love. And Paul wrote: "If I speak, have prophetic powers, have all faith, give away possessions, hand over my body, but don't have love...."

What do you do with your life, and Why? No. Maybe that's not the right question. What do you do with your love and why? Love that is patient and kind, not jealous or boastful, or arrogant or rude, love that does not insist on its own way, and rejoices in the truth; Love that bears, believes, hopes, and endures all things?

Obviously that's a question that I can't answer here for each of you. But maybe this sermon has created some thoughts and answers within your own mind to put into action in your own lives... to "do" for love. Maybe it has caused you to look at your love from a different perspective, a different angle, or in a different light.

Can what we do for love, out of love, in love really do that? Can it bear, believe, hope, and endure all things? Again, that's a question that only you can answer.

But it might be answered this way:

I once heard a seminary professor offer this kind of answer to that question about love. For clarity, and for reasons that will become apparent, I'm going to personalize his message into the first person, but I want you to know that I'm not talking about me!

There are times in my life when I find myself invited as a guest speaker before a group of people who, wonder of wonders, are seeking to learn something from me. I've arrived for a seminar, and am making the presentation to a group of people who are gathered in rows of metal folding chairs before me in some church basement. The presentation is going really well, wonderfully well for that matter. It's one of those moments you know when you're being heard, the audience is so still that you could hear a pin drop on a carpeted floor. The folding chairs don't squeak, the participants don't shift positions, because you have

them in the palm of your hand. And you're just about to make your point, the one that will put you in the place that is really just a little lower than the angels in your audience's mind. And just as you open your mouth to do that...

...the phone rings; the spell is broken, and no matter what you say after that there is no way in that group that you will ever, ever reach the altitude of "a little lower than the angels." Chairs begin to squeak and the audience realizes that their butts are getting a little tired and sore, and they shift around, and you know that you'll never get them back again. Then the host of this meeting comes and tells you that there is a call for you. And that group that just 30 seconds earlier was in the palm of your hand, is no longer there, and isn't likely to get back there again. So you go and take the call. It's your wife. She says: "I just called to say, 'I love you.'" And you say, well, thank you very much, honey, but I was right in the middle of my presentation. I had them in the palm of my hand. I was going to be just a little lower than the angels...

But suppose, that just before you left the night before to come and conduct this seminar, suppose that in the hour before you were to be separated from your spouse, that you had one of those classic battles that happen when people who live in close proximity with each other have from time to time. And suppose that in the midst of this conflict, each of you, at least in your own mind, indicated and consigned the other's place of salvation (or lack thereof) -- **for all eternity!!!** And furthermore, you know, that that consignment would not be to the place where **you** would be spending eternity. Have you ever had a conversation (and I'm being gentle with that word) like that with your significant other?

Now put yourself back in that seminar. Back in that room where you had the audience in the palm of your hand, back where you had visions of standing at least at the feet of the angelic choir, if not leading the entire bass section yourself. The phone rings, and the spell is broken, and no matter what you say after that there is no way in that group that you will ever reach the altitude of "a little lower than the angels." Chairs begin to squeak and the audience realizes that their butts are getting a little tired and sore, and they shift around, and you know that you'll never get them back again. Then the host of this meeting comes and tells you that there is a call for you. You pick up the phone and your spouse whom you had only a few hours before consigned to the farthest reaches of eternal existence from you, and she had done the same to you, says quietly:

"I just called to say... *I love you.*"

That is love that indeed does bear all things, believe all things, hopes all things and endures all things. That kind of love never ends. And when you hear those words, in that voice, experience that grace, you will be just a bit lower than the angels, no matter what else happens.

Please pray with me.

From time to time, O God, in the expression of the love that is really a gift from and through you, may the things we do for love, and the words we express for love, and the way we receive love, come from our end of the line. Amen.