

A Homily Preached by  
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“and the award goes to”  
Epiphany C IV, February 3, 2013  
Jeremiah 1:4-10  
1 Corinthians 13:1-13  
Luke 4:21-30

Recently we have been inundated with Awards Shows on television. Just now there is the hype of the Academy Awards nominees and the upcoming televised Oscar ceremony on February 24<sup>th</sup>. But we have also had coverage of the Golden Globes, the People's Choice, the Screen Actor's Guild Awards, the Emmy's...the list goes on.

What if there were a “Golden Halo” Award for the best loved, most oft quoted Bible verses? I can tell you from those of us who have been reading 1% of the Bible each week for months now, the award would not go to The Books of 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> Chronicles. But today's Epistle likely would make the short-list for many of us. I Corinthians 13 is read at many marriage services. And many grieving families who have read today's passage aloud in my office as we perused Scripture readings for their loved ones funerals have chosen Paul's words on love. I know that Paul's advice to the church at Corinth has touched our hearts where we most need to be touched.

For many it is the surety that “love never ends” that touches our hearts. Christ's love for us is the model – love in community, because it is only by loving that Christianity can exist. The love here is agape – love for others (others plural). Agape love is a love that builds up – love in community that is inspired by the love of God in Christ for us, through the Holy Spirit. So it is the expression of love in the form of the Holy Trinity that built the church at Corinth and builds us up as well. The love here also is a love of action, not merely of feeling, as in the expression of eros love. Rather, love, as Paul understood it, is true agape love – not egocentric but self-giving – sacrificial in character.

I have a story about just this sort of love. A good friend Pat had to postpone some needed surgery because her husband Richard had an automobile accident. He had a head injury and rehabilitation took a long long time. His recovery was going well, so the next

year my friend did have her surgery. I worked at the hospital for her for 6 weeks and was able to visit with her every day since her husband for medical reasons still was not allowed to drive. He was able to take the tractor out though. I drove by their cattle farm every day to and from the hospital. On the sloping hill just west of their home Richard was very active working on some project. He was moving manure. He placed the “fertilizer” in the shape of a heart that read “I love you Pat” in the centre. It was the sweetest childlike gesture that expressed his love for his wife. And she saw as she came home from the hospital. It was love in action. And that sort of self-less love expressed in a heart never ends because every year the grass in that part of the pasture comes up brighter and greener than ever. That is a love that never ends.

This chapter of Paul’s 1<sup>st</sup> letter to the Corinthians is often thought of as a poetic hymn to love. We like to pluck it out of its context because it is so beautiful. But it is best understood in the context of being advice to the church – in Corinth and even in Calgary today. Paul was addressing pressing problems. He was instructing the new believers at Corinth – and we too are taught – about spiritual gifts. It seems that the Corinthians valued the gift of tongues too highly. So Paul taught that there are three groups of gifted people who are especially important: apostles who spread the good news (1 Corinthians 12:28), prophets who tell new insights into the faith, and teachers of the faith. But then he said that faith and hope are indeed important human attributes, but of all the great virtues, love is the greatest (The triad of “faith, hope, and love” is also in Romans 5:1-5; Galatians 5:5-6; Colossians 1:4-5; 1 Thessalonians 1:3, 5:8.). The most important gift is love, the expression of in the community. And Christ’s love for us is what every community of the faithful should strive for.

Whatever is spoken, if said without love is like the clatter of pagan worship. Prophecy is important, but without love of one’s fellows, it is nothing. And helping others, even to the extent of self-denial, is worthless without love. Obviously the Corinthians had divisive attitudes. And Paul addressed the fleeting nature of most gifts – except for love which is different from all others. Love never ends: it is transcendent. Love continues

beyond this era, into the time when we will be one with Christ. Love (v. 13) is the “greatest” because it continues unchanged. In the present age, all that we do through the Spirit is “partial” (v. 10), incomplete, immature. “Now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face;” mirrors, being polished metal, give a fuzzy image, but “then” in the age to come (v. 12) we will see God clearly just as Moses who had a face-to-face knowledge of God (See Exodus 33:11; Numbers 12:8; Deuteronomy 34:10). We have not had that experience – not yet. Later we will know God fully.

Paul urged the Corinthians to make love their aim. And I urge us to do the same. It would be so easy to read Paul’s teachings as a literary exercise as we might study poetry – to treat this famous passage as an independent poem that idealizes love. Indeed the rabbis of the 1<sup>st</sup> century would have called Paul’s words the language of angels. They even debated about what language the angels used. But really this passage is not a poem at all but lyrical prose. Rather than have our heads in the clouds, we need to remember that God’s love was made manifest here on earth through Christ becoming human – by his becoming one of us. Rather than immersing ourselves in sentimentality we need to remember to read Paul’s teachings in the context of the new Christians in Corinth. So love here is not a general ideal to strive for, but a concrete expression of Christian life in the midst of conflict – conflict in the 1<sup>st</sup> century church that was fascinated with spirituality and spiritual gifts.

So when we apply Paul’s teaching to today’s world – to the Christian church today – do we see any parallels with the Church at Corinth? I don’t know about you, but I hear over and over that people today are hungry for community. I hear that people claim to be spiritual but not religious. I hear that people are being fed by secular entities that promote individual spirituality. Self-help and individualism are promoted by any number of Internet sights. The self-help section at Chapters is larger than the religion bookshelves. Well, then, we are not so different from the Corinthians, are we?

What is missing in people’s search to grow their spiritual life? I would say it is the

love we find in community. So, if I were handing out the Golden Halo Award for the best loved Bible verse, I still would choose Paul's teaching on love, but not so much because of the beauty of the passage itself, which is considerable, or that it could easily have come with angelic accompaniment, but because without love we are nothing. None of our gifts and none of our works are worth anything without love. Love in and of itself is not a spiritual gift, however, the measure of one's gifts is whether or not the gifts are used with love, and love in action in community. I have seen true gifts of the spirit because they are accompanied by love, active love. I have seen you all doing God's work in the world with love. I look forward to knowing God's love even more fully because I have experienced it in community. So the award goes to the 13<sup>th</sup> chapter of Paul's 1<sup>st</sup> Letter to the Corinthians.

May we all use our gifts in the world always showing agape love to others and one another.

Lord, May it be so.

Amen.