

“The One Essential” – 1 Cor 13:1-13 – 4th After Epiphany – Jan 28, 2007

Well, the long-awaited, much-publicized moment is here. After two weeks of promising “another sermon for another Sunday”, that day has arrived. And not a moment too soon, I might say, for the tension has been palpable, the waiting anxious, the congregants breathless with nervous anticipation ... as if! No, I don’t take myself that seriously – but I have set today’s sermon up with the two previous ones, and I believe for good reason, namely that unless we hear this text in the context of what has gone before – and to some extent what will immediately follow – unless we hear this text as an integral part of Paul’s argument then we miss the whole point.

Unfortunately, that’s exactly what happens so often with this very-well-known, and very popular, text. In fact it is so popular that I run a big risk of offending people – a lot of people – when I point out how it is so widely misunderstood. Probably the place or occasion upon which this text is most often used is at weddings ... all you have to hear is, “love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful ...” and most people immediately recall images of young (and not-so-young these days) couples gazing dreamily into each others’ eyes as the preacher drones on. And in case you missed hearing it during the ceremony because fully one-third of the people turned to the person next to them and said, “ahh, isn’t that beautiful?!” you have another chance to read the passage again on the napkins, or the place cards, with images of cherubs and violins. You might well even hear this passage repeated several times during the reception speeches – usually misquoted from memory.

Now please, please, do not misunderstand me here. Taken out of its original context, and coated with sticky sweetness, it is perfectly understandable why this passage is used so often in this way. There is even some benefit, I guess, if people come away with a dreamy understanding of love from hearing or reading it one more time. But I strongly suspect if people recognized the original context, and what Paul was trying to say, and to whom, and why – they might think twice about using it in such a gentle situation.

A lot of what we say is conveyed not just by the words we use, but by the way we say them. As a simple example, the difference between “[*bored*] what are we doing tonight?” and “[*excited*] what are we doing tonight?” is enough to make the person of whom we’re asking the question think either we aren’t particularly keen on doing anything, or are avidly and passionately looking forward to some excitement. Same words, but an entirely different implication if not different meaning.

Now, take the passage from Paul’s letter to the Corinthians. This is how it is usually read: “[*syrupy-sweetly*] Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude ...”. Now hear it the way I think, given the context, Paul was saying it as he penned it: [*forcefully, accusingly*] Love is patient! Love is kind! Love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude ...” Hear the difference? I think Paul was indirectly accusing at least some of the people in Corinth of not being loving, and so the relevant tone of voice is accusatory, not saccharine-sweet. Follow me through this reasoning, and see if you agree.

Recall that this text is in the middle of a section, what we now call Chapters 12-14, in which Paul is addressing a controversial issue raised by some people in Corinth in a previous letter to him. The issue, as we saw two weeks ago in the first half of Chapter 12, seems to be that a number of people in that congregation were claiming that there was only one spiritual gift that mattered, namely speaking in tongues, and that unless you demonstrated that you had that particular gift you couldn’t consider yourself to be a “true” Christian. Paul began his argument with the declaration that there are many, many gifts all given by the one Spirit of God, and that the diversity of gifts was in itself a gift from God. More importantly, he claimed, was the understanding that each person’s gift was to be used for the common good. Seeming through this argument to be endorsing a situation of chaos in which everyone would feel free to go their own way with their own gift, Paul quickly makes the argument for

unity in the second half of Chapter 12 reminding them that even with their God-given diversity they are all one, all part of the body of Christ.

This is where he begins to point out the one essential ingredient that seems to be missing in Corinth. So often we tend to skip over Paul's introductory paragraphs, using them as "throw-aways" that are used only to lead in to the real subject at hand. So often, by doing just that, we miss his point entirely. "If I speak in tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal" he begins, and we are so attuned to sliding over it we fail to hear the attack here on speaking in tongues ... that all the speaking in tongues that is done without love is just so much noise. And he goes on to similarly contend that all prophetic powers leading to complete and total understanding of all mysteries is nothing, unless love is present. The same is true of faith – all the faith necessary to move mountains counts for nothing unless the person with that faith also has love. Even totally sacrificial giving and charitable works are meaningless without love.

And Paul wants them to be absolutely clear what he means by love, and I think by implication that he wants them to look in a mirror and see what they are lacking. People sometimes wonder how Paul, who seems in so many places in his other writings to be somewhat of a cantankerous and grumpy old man, could have penned such a sweet passage as this. I don't think he either wrote it to be sweet nor to have it heard as being sweet. I think he is, completely consistent with his other writing, pointing an accusing finger at those in Corinth who were being arrogant, rude, self-serving, rebellious, unkind, and boastful about their faith and their spirituality and telling them to recognize that they were lacking the one essential thing that really mattered, namely love.

And lest they, and we, misunderstand and think that love is some kind of descriptive characteristic that can be worn like a cloak, Paul is clear that love is an action – in linguistic terms for him love is a verb, not an adjective. Love is not looking like, love is doing – bearing all things patiently, believing all things in hope, enduring through the hard times as well as the easy ones. Love is rejoicing in the truth – supporting, uplifting, edifying, freeing, bringing justice. Love is participative, targeted at bringing about the good of the other, not the self. Paul's kind of love cannot exist in a vacuum, it is the very working at a positive relationship focused on the well-being of the other, and by implication the folks in Corinth who were boastful of their own gifts and of their own self-assigned status as being "real" Christians clearly were falling short of displaying the one essential that meant everything, namely love.

Moreover, Paul is clear to point out that love, by way of contrast with the spiritual gifts, will never end. Speaking in tongues, prophesying, knowledge, all these will shrivel and return to the dust, but love, which is the foundation of God's relationship with us in Christ, will continue forever.

If you're still not convinced yet of my argument that this famous passage from 1 Cor 13 should be heard aggressively and with a hint of an accusatory tone, read on through Chapter 14 in which Paul returns to struggle in more detail with the issues of speaking in tongues, prophesying and even practices in worship. The lectionary has us skip over Chapter 14 which is a pity – it may even be a conspiracy of sorts since the ending of that Chapter shows clearly that Paul was a Presbyterian, calling for everything to be done "decently and in order"! (For the ecclesiastical censors: I'm just kidding – that's a joke!)

Now I believe that there is some benefit to us in hearing this beautiful passage in those much harsher tones, the greatest benefit being the realization that the kind of love Paul calls forth from us in our faith, the kind of love shown to us from God in Christ, is not passive, or inactive, or genteel and recoiling, but the kind of love shown by faithful like Mother Theresa – gutsy, involved, active, participatory, tough as chrome steel but compassionate and gentle. Not that all or even any of us will turn into such saints, but she's a great example. Other great examples abound – all you have to do is

look around this room. Flipping pancakes at and cleaning up after a Community Breakfast are examples of Paul's participatory love. Standing in a chilly room handing out tins at the Food Bank is another. Giving up part of an evening to drive a van full of bread from Cob's to the church is another. The list goes on, and on. I believe we need to hear this passage in tough tones, both because doing so gives us a clearer and more accurate understanding of the love Paul was evoking, but also because in doing so we can recognize and be thankful for the love we see here. Faith, hope and love do indeed abide, and even abound, and the greatest of these is love. God bless you as you love one another as you are loved in Christ Jesus, our Lord.