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The Fifth Sunday of Easter

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We Strive to Love as Jesus Loved

In suffering and dying for our sins, Jesus established the ultimate definition of love: the attitude of the heart, mind, and will that gives freely and faithfully even to those who do not deserve to be loved. On the night before he died, Jesus called on believers of all time to imitate his love: "As I have loved you," he said, "so you must love one another."

Sermon

1 Corinthians 13:1-13

If I speak in the tongues of men or of angels, but do not have love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal. 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 do not have love, I am nothing. If I give all I possess to the poor and give over my body to hardship that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing.

Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It does not dishonor others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres.

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. For we know in part and we prophesy in part, but when completeness comes, what is in part disappears. 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 the ways of childhood behind me. For now we see only a 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.

And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love.

Introduction - At a certain point in our lives God called us to be Christians. Most of us became Christians at our baptisms when the Lord worked through water and his Word to adopt us into his family. Some of you became Christians later in life as you heard and believed the good news about Jesus. St. Paul wrote to the Ephesians, **It is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast.**

When God called us to be Christians, he didn't change the way he created us. At a certain point in our lives God gave us characteristics we still have today like blue eyes and brown hair and long fingers. He molded our personalities so we could become wise leaders or faithful followers. He gave us skills to fix machinery or play an instrument or cook a meal. David wrote in Psalm 139, **I will praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made.**

So God has gifted us with faith and he has gifted us with abilities and he puts these gifts together to enable us to serve and work in his kingdom. God combines faith and action in every Christian, but he does it in different ways. As we look back at the story of the Church we find some people whose faith was so strong and whose gifts were so prominent that we still know their names. But there were others, millions and billions of others, who put their faith into action quietly and modestly and brought countless blessings to people in their world. You all are in this group and there are people in your lives who thank God for you.

The Christian congregation in Corinth was filled with exceptional Christians whom God had gifted with extraordinary gifts. Most of us here today would have been intimidated by most of them. But there was trouble in Corinth. In too

many cases strong faith had turned into arrogance and impressive actions had become divisive. St. Paul was impressed by their faith and he found value in their actions, but he needed to clarify and teach. And that's what he does in the Second Reading for today from his First Letter to the Corinthians.

The faith we have in our hearts is a gift that comes from God. The skills and abilities we use in the Church are gifts that come from God. As he explained to the believers in Corinth, so St. Paul explains to us this morning that...

The Greatest of God's Gifts is Love

1. Corinth was one of the great cities of Greece. It was a city of commerce and culture, probably a lot like our large cities today. Paul preached in Corinth for over a year on his second missionary journey and was instrumental in starting the Christian congregation there. The congregation had a solid spiritual reputation and church members had all kinds of gifts. But things changed. Paul began receiving alarming reports that the congregation was plagued by problems. Members with special gifts thought they were better than people without those gifts. Members with theological insights came up with doctrinal interpretations that went against the gospel. These were intelligent and prosperous people, but they were using God's gifts to divide the congregation rather than to grow it. For all their gifts they had forgotten about the gift of love.

It was time to teach and Paul made himself the example. **If I speak in the tongues of men or of angels, but do not have love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal.** Speaking in tongues was one of the most extraordinary gifts in the early church and not everyone had the gift. In some cases it was the ability to speak in foreign languages without training, like the apostles did on Pentecost. In other cases it was ecstatic praise and prayer at times of high emotion. But without love, Paul wrote, this kind of speaking is nothing but noise. **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 do not have love, I am nothing.** If God gives me the gift to assess the future, or the gift to dig into the depths of his love or the gift to understand everything he says in his Word or if the Spirit has given me a faith so strong and so firm that I can solve every problem and withstand every attack—without love all of these gifts slide and slink away. **If I give all I possess to the poor and give over my body to hardship that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing.** To give generously is a gift from God; to give cheerfully is a greater gift. To give everything I have is an even greater gift. To give my body to hardship for the sake of the gospel is almost an indescribable gift—and it's a gift that St. Paul actually had. But without love, Paul writes, even these gifts have no value and no worth.

If I do not have love...if I do not have love...if I do not have love. Paul rings this phrase like a tolling bell at a funeral. All of God's gifts dissolve if I do not have love. But now turn it around. If I have love, then all of God's gifts to me become splendid and spectacular. Every one of us in the church today has been gifted by God in some way. I can't begin to mention them all or even give examples; it would take all day. Some of us have gifts that everyone can see; some of us have gifts that only God can see. But every gift God gives becomes exceptional and extraordinary in God's sight when he gives us his greatest gift, the gift of love.

2. Finding a definition for love is a little like playing The Price Is Right. You get three choices; two of them are klunkers and one of them is the real deal. So behind door Number 1 is the love of passion: sexual passion or war passion. Behind door Number 2 is the love of friendship: I love you because you love me. God's definition of love is behind door Number 3: In God's view, love is a spiritual and intellectual mindset which loves others as much as and even more than we love ourselves. God's concept of love is that we love people even when they don't deserve to be loved. This is exactly the kind of love Jesus shows to us. **Even though Jesus was in very nature God, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant. He humbled himself** so he could stand in our place to free us from sin and death and hell. Jesus said in the Gospel for today, **As I have loved you, so you must love one another.** Love is the greatest of God's gifts to us because it imitates the greatness of God's love for us.

Paul puts this in practical terms. I'm going to read what Paul wrote and then pause after each phrase so we can think about what these words mean in our everyday lives. **Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It does not dishonor others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs.**

Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres.

Makes you feel pretty rotten, doesn't it. If we're honest with ourselves, we realize how often we've failed to love others as Jesus loved us. But the truth is that Jesus did love us; he loved us so much that he lived and died and rose to forgive us and save us. And now as we follow him in faith, he gives us a model and a pattern of how we can use his greatest gift in our lives with one another.

3. **Love never fails.** That's how Paul begins the last point he wants to make in his great love chapter. Love is God's greatest gift because it never ends, never disappears, never goes away, not even in heaven. When Jesus comes again and takes his people home, all the gifts he gave us to serve and help others, all the insights, all the skills, all the talents—they will all become unnecessary. What about those gifts Paul mentioned earlier? **Where there are prophecies, they will cease; where there are tongues, they will be stilled; where there is knowledge, it will pass away.** It's the same for all of us. Everything in our lives is about here and now. We're born, we grow up, we find a job, we get married, we raise a family, we save for retirement, our bodies grow old, and we die. We think about the here and now because the here and now is all we know and all we understand. Here and now, Paul wrote, **we know in part and we prophesy in part, but when completeness comes, what is in part disappears.** The here and now isn't the end for us. We're not finished when we die. Heaven opens up a completely new perspective and we'll think differently there and then than we do here and now. Paul compares it to growing up: **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 the ways of childhood behind me.** Or like looking into a mirror: **Now we see only a reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face.** Here's his point: **Now I know in part, then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known.** When we gain the "there and then," the "here and now" won't matter much.

So what will we discover when we get to the "then and there"? **And now these three remain: faith, hope and love.** We know about faith. God gave us faith to join us to Jesus and give us life with God. In heaven faith will still unite us with Jesus and with all those who gather around his throne. We know about hope. God gave us hope so we would be confident of the future and content with our lot in life. In heaven hope will fill us with joy to know that all this paradise will never end. **These three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love.** The greatest of God's gifts to us is love. Love is the greatest of God's gifts because it purifies our actions toward God and one another. Love imitates the love Jesus showed to us to save us. And through all eternity our love will embrace God as God's love embraces us. **God is love. Those who live in love live in God, and God lives in them.** Amen.