

Sermon 2-3-19
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Trinity Lutheran Church
W. Hempstead, NY
Based on the Second Lesson for The Fourth Sunday after Epiphany,
1Corinthians 12:31-13:13

What Is This Thing Called Love?

Of all Paul's letters, the two letters to Corinth deal most extensively with the daily life of Christ's Church. There were many difficulties in Corinth created by a church full of former pagans who had converted to Christianity. Paul's letters correct both the incorrect doctrines and ungodly practices of the church at Corinth.

This is now the third Sunday with a reading from 1Corinthians chapters 12, 13 and 14. These chapters form a unit on what should be a blessing to Christ's Church – namely the spiritual gifts that have their origin in God's Holy Spirit. But in Corinth, there were problems with the spiritual gifts.

In order to understand the purpose of spiritual gifts we turn first to Romans 1:11-12, "11 I long to see you so that I may impart to you some spiritual gift to make you strong – 12 that is, that you and I may be mutually encouraged by each other's faith." "Strong" is the key word here. The Greek word translated "strong" means literally "to turn resolutely in a certain direction" or figuratively "to confirm." So we see here that spiritual gifts are the result of faith in Jesus Christ. And mutual encouragement of one another through these results of faith has the benefit of keeping Christians steadfastly turned in the right direction – toward the Lord.

Next, we turn to 1 Corinthians 1:7-9, "7 Therefore you do not lack any spiritual gift as you eagerly wait for our Lord Jesus Christ to be revealed. 8 He will keep you strong to the end, so that you will be blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. 9 God, who has called you into fellowship with his Son Jesus Christ our Lord, is faithful." Notice here that a word translated "strong" is used again. It's a different but synonymous Greek word that means literally to have a stable base or to be established or be confirmed. God knows that Christians need strength.

Finally we turn to a verse that was part of our second lesson two weeks ago - 1 Corinthians 12:7, "Now to each one the manifestation of the Spirit is given for the common good." The word translated "the common good" means literally in Greek to "bear together."

So, spiritual gifts are meant to strengthen the people of God so that together we can hold up under the assaults of this life. Each spiritual gift comes with a grace and power beyond our natural abilities. Each is from the hand of God. Each is of the Holy Spirit. Each is to be approached with the reverence due the living God. When shared among God's people these gifts are meant to strengthen our faith that God is real. His Spirit is among us. Father, Son and Holy Spirit are dwelling within us. He is using us in this life to the praise of His glory. He does this through our various vocations in this world as well as spiritual gifts.

Now, the reason that the newly converted Christians of Corinth needed strengthening was because of the persecution that applies pressure to the lives of Christians in order to turn them back to paganism. As we've said so many times, paganism of every variety has at its root an absolute denial that there is a Creator God to whom we are all responsible. And paganism has reasserted itself in our time with a vengeance.

It's the return to paganism that has brought the State of New York to the same place ancient pagan Sparta got to where they left unwanted babies out on the rocks to die. If a baby happens to survive an abortion attempt and be born alive, it's now legal in New York to leave the child uncared for to die. And, the State Senate applauded the laws that now make this horror possible. Yes. At this point in the history of this country, Christians need strengthening against paganism as we have never needed it here before. God has the means to do so if we will call on Him.

Now, all would be well in Christ's Church with spiritual gifts if it weren't for the one overarching difficulty that besets every human being in every aspect of life, even our dream life – namely, the sinful nature.

As creatures of a righteous and holy God, we're meant to have a deep, joyous and intimate relationship with God and one another, in perfect righteousness and holiness. Indeed, in the resurrection of the dead, that's the way things will be eternally for those in Jesus Christ. It's what all true Christians are headed for and should desire above all things.

However, when Adam and Eve ate of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, they rebelled and declared independence from God for themselves and for us. They claimed the right for themselves to establish their own standards of good and evil apart from God. To this day we rebelliously insist that God accept our personal and corporate standards of good and evil and judge us by them rather than by His own standards. That's a definition of what the sinful nature does.

But Scripture unequivocally tells us that God judges us according to His own righteousness and His own standards, not ours. And this is the part we hate. For when God defines righteousness, it becomes absolutely clear that we have been rebels who have despised our Creator and His Word. We cannot come before Him with a righteousness equal to His. We can only come before Him with corrupt hearts, unclean hands, evil deeds and polluted minds.

But God has not forsaken us. After all, like it or not, this is His universe, His earth. We are His creatures. He is our Creator. Therefore, to remedy the situation God sent Jesus into the world. As it says in 2 Corinthians 5:21, "God made him [Jesus] who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God." Adam and Eve forsook the righteousness of God. Jesus came into the world so that all who desire God's righteousness might have it freely given them.

The most eloquent preaching of the gospel appears in Ephesians 2:8-9, "8 For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith – and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God – 9 not by works, so that no one can boast." Notice the word, "boast?" We could boast if we had a righteousness equal to God's. But since we don't and cannot because of the sinful nature inherited from Adam and Eve, no one can boast of their moral life – especially before God. However, Jesus alone can boast of His obedient moral life. He was obedient to the Father even when forsaken to death on a

cross, absorbing sin's punishment for us. And Jesus' sacrifice in our place is what grace is. Faith takes hold of what God gives and makes it our own. And this is what brings salvation – which is acceptance from God – to our souls.

Sinners who have faith that the righteousness of Christ has made them righteous in God's sight, in fact, have Christ's righteousness in God's sight. This is how faith is credited to them as righteousness. May this be so for you.

So, the work of Jesus on the cross brings our vertical relationship with God into a gracious state. It is by grace we have been saved, through faith in the work of God's only begotten Son. But, what of our horizontal relationship with each other and the other people in this world?

Let's see Ephesians 2 again, only this time adding verse 10. Ephesians 2:8-9, "8 For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith – and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God – 9 not by works, so that no one can boast. 10 For we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do."

In the vertical relationship with God, the Christian becomes a product of God's workmanship in Christ Jesus. We are re-created for the good works God assigns us to perform for our neighbors. Who are our neighbors? The people who live with us, the people we're related to, the people we work with, the people who we live in community with, the people we're on the road with, the people who serve us, brothers and sisters in the church – basically anyone we come in contact with.

What are good works? Anything we do to serve our neighbor – even if we get paid for it. Good works are a combination of good attitudes, merciful dealings with people – even the contentious – devotion to the highest skill and the best product, faithfulness, and much more.

So are spiritual gifts good works? I would think that anything of God's design, for the common good that strengthens Christians under persecution pressure is a good work. Therefore, spiritual gifts are gracious gifts and good works from God. But, as we mentioned, our sinful nature can destroy the good effect God gave us spiritual gifts for. The sinful nature can twist what God graciously gives for the common good and the strengthening of Christ's Church into causes for boasting and envy.

Now, 1 Corinthians 13 can be isolated from its context and that's frequently done. For instance, sections of it are used at weddings. This is because it's considered one of the definitive chapters on love in the New Testament.

However, as we said, First Corinthians chapters 12, 13 and 14 are a unit. Chapter 12 is the basic course on spiritual gifts. Chapter 14 is the advanced course on spiritual gifts, especially on the gifts called tongues and prophecy. Sandwiched in the middle, Chapter 13 is the course on the proper godly motivation for the spiritual gifts. The chapter makes clear that without the proper motivation, the gifts are just showing off and making trouble. That proper motivation is love.

Unfortunately, the English word "love" means far too many things. Therefore, when the very specific Greek Word, "Agape," is translated as love, it loses some of its impact. Agape is love from God. As such it's full of compassion and favor, the compassion that God shows toward undeserving sinners. But it's also full of God's undying commitment toward undeserving sinners. Finally, it is full of God's plan for undeserving sinners, and not our own plans. In Agape love, God gives us what we

actually need, not what we lust for or crave after. He gives us what is actually good for us in His sight. Therefore, when Christians show God's Agape love toward one another and toward the world as a good work, it will be filled with God's earnest compassion, commitment and what God deems good for us and our neighbors.

The one thing Agape love is not full of is our sinful nature. This can be seen in what Paul says in 1 Corinthians 13:4-7, "4 Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. 5 It is not rude, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. 6 Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. 7 It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres."

So Agape love is patient, kind, rejoices only with God's truth, always protects, trusts, hopes and perseveres. There is nothing in that list that comes natural to us. Therefore, whenever any of these qualities pop out of us, it is grace from God. And since these are God's qualities and He has meant for Christians to display them perfectly in the coming Kingdom, we should, therefore, desire them here. We should earnestly seek them from our gracious Lord for the purpose of blessing those around us.

Now, the list of what Agape love is not is most important. Envy, boasting, pride, rudeness, self-seeking, anger, grudges and delighting in evil have no place in Agape love.

When studying this chapter the two sins of envy and boasting in particular attracted my attention. For this is what too often happens with spiritual gifts. It also happens between churches.

In the natural, envious people always think that someone else has more than they have, and these others absolutely don't deserve it. Years ago, we had a family in the congregation that had family in Cuba. When the travel restrictions were lifted back in the early 2000's, they went. They came back with this tale. There are constant shortages of goods in a communist economy. Therefore, if you were fortunate enough to find some coffee in a store, you had to brew your coffee in a closet. Because, if the smell got loose in your apartment house, envious neighbors would call the authorities down on you to confiscate your coffee – all because they didn't have any coffee.

Envy over spiritual gifts works the same way. If I don't have that gift no one else can have it. And if they claim to have it, I'll call the devil down on them.

On the other side is boasting. Why do people boast? Generally it's because they think they are greatly lacking. Therefore, they use whatever they're boasting about to make sure that you know they are a person of importance.

Having a spiritual gift or two does not a somebody make in the Kingdom of God. Consider what it says in Ephesians 2:18, "... through him [Jesus] we ... [all] have access to the Father by one Spirit." Consider also Ephesians 3:12, "In him [Jesus] and through faith in him we may approach God with freedom and confidence." Did you see that last word – confidence? Faith in God's Word that in Agape love He has equally poured out on everyone the same confident access to Him prevents envy and boasting. Doubt, envy, fear and inadequacy have to die with Christ so that we may be filled with the positives of Agape love by God's Holy Spirit. For, salvation is

the one and only thing on earth in which there is true equality of outcome. And it is in this Word that every Christian heart is meant to rest in peace with God.

On the other hand, there is not equality of outcome with the spiritual gifts. As we're told in 1 Corinthians 12:11, "All these [gifts] are the work of one and the same Spirit, and he gives them to each one, just as he determines." Who determines? The Holy Spirit. Therefore, if we will rest ourselves in the understanding that God always knows what He's doing, we will neither be envious nor boast of what we have no control over. For, the Spirit of God distributes His gifts precisely when needed to precisely whom He decides to use at any particular moment.

Agape love does not argue with Lord Holy Spirit about His choices. The sinful nature will argue, but not Agape love. Therefore, if we will dedicate ourselves to the excellent good work of Agape love, the good works of spiritual gifts will also be ours, at precisely the point Lord Holy Spirit deems a gift is needed. Take heart, people of God. The Lord is with those who believe His Word. Amen.

All Bible quotes are from the NIV.