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St. Paul's Lutheran Church
2100 16th Street SW
Austin, MN 55912-1749
Pastor Ted Barthels
Sermon preached on
February 3, 2019
4th Sunday after Epiphany

Scripture Lessons: Jeremiah 1:4-10, Luke 4:20-32
Hymns: 351; 349:1-4; 363; 412:1,3 (248:1-3)

Grace be unto you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

Sermon Text: 1 Corinthians 12:27-13:13

²⁷Now you are the body of Christ, and members individually. ²⁸And God has appointed these in the church: first apostles, second prophets, third teachers, after that miracles, then gifts of healings, helps, administrations, varieties of tongues. ²⁹Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Are all teachers? Are all workers of miracles? ³⁰Do all have gifts of healings? Do all speak with tongues? Do all interpret? ³¹But earnestly desire the best gifts. And yet I show you a more excellent way.

¹³Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I have become sounding brass or a clanging cymbal. ²And though I have *the gift of prophecy*, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and though I have all faith, so that I could remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. ³And though I bestow all my goods to feed *the poor*, and though I give my body to be burned, but have not love, it profits me nothing.

⁴Love suffers long *and* is kind; love does not envy; love does not parade itself, is not puffed up; ⁵does not behave rudely, does not seek its own, is not provoked, thinks no evil; ⁶does not rejoice in iniquity, but rejoices in the truth; ⁷bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

⁸ Love never fails. But whether *there are* prophecies, they will fail; whether *there are* tongues, they will cease; whether *there is* knowledge, it will vanish away. ⁹ For we know in part and we prophesy in part. ¹⁰ But when that which is perfect has come, then that which is in part will be done away.

¹¹ When I was a child, I spoke as a child, I understood as a child, I thought as a child; but when I became a man, I put away childish things. ¹² For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part, but then I shall know just as I also am known.

¹³ And now abide faith, hope, love, these three; but the greatest of these *is* love. (NKJV)

This is the Word of God.

Sanctify us, oh Lord, through Your truth. Your Word is truth. Amen.

In Christ Jesus, God our Savior, dear fellow Redeemed:

INTRO: Is this the most romantic chapter in the Bible?-- This morning's text includes some of the most commonly requested verses of Scriptures for weddings. This is simply because the word "love" appears so frequently in the 13th chapter of 1st Corinthians, and people truly believe that the Apostle Paul is describing the romantic love they are feeling for one another as they prepare for their nuptials. A careful reading of our text reveals that the Apostle is actually speaking of a totally different kind of love, something more than even the deepest and most passionate romantic feelings wedded couples may experience. In fact it is something purer and far more powerful. The love spoken of in our text is that Agape love that moved our heavenly Father to send His Son into the world. It is the love that filled Jesus' heart so that He went to Jerusalem knowing that He would be sorely abused by His enemies, and crucified, and there endure the curse of God for the sin of the world. This is a great and powerful love directed toward a world full of sinners. This is a love

that drives to action, a great sacrificial action for the benefit of others, others who are underserving of such Agape love.

The world claims to love in this way, but they cannot stop seeking a benefit for themselves, at least in finding some self-worth, self-satisfaction, or glory in their acts of kindness. It is then no longer the altruistic love they claim it to be but rather some other love, love of friends, love of family, romantic love, or self-love. All these are flawed by the corrupting power of sin within the heart of man.

Epiphany is all about the glory Christ being revealed. This section of 1st Corinthians speaks of us, the Christ believers in this world, about being the body of Christ. God has given each of us a place in the body of Christ, and God has given each of us gifts so that we might properly function within the body. Paul wrote that every member of the body is important and the body suffers when any member can't or simply neglects to fulfill its function.

A very different problem arises when some begin to see themselves as being superior to others whose function appears less important. Some regard the gifts and abilities given to them by God as being to their glory instead of the glory of Christ. So the Spirit would lead us to appreciate --

THEME: Love's Impact on Spiritual Gifts.

In the early Christian Church there were some special signs and gifts that lent themselves to reinforcing the spread of the gospel. These stood alongside other gifts that we might regard as more common and normal in our 21st century setting. What Paul wanted all then and now to understand was that these were all -

I. God's Appointed Gifts.

The Apostle Paul lists several of the more apparent gifts of the Holy Spirit in our text, giving each of them an order of

importance. Apostles and prophets topped the list for a couple of very good reasons. Apostles and prophets received messages directly from the Lord. A second reason for their importance was that they were directly involved in the proclamation of the gospel. They were mouthpieces of the Lord declaring exactly what the Lord put in their mouths. This was especially important in the early days of the church before the New Testament books had been written by inspiration and assembled for the continued instruction of the Church. Then came teachers of the Word which in this listing of gifts to the Church would include pastors and evangelists. These are individuals equipped by the Lord to instruct and lead others into a deeper understanding of the inspired Word of God. To the world pastors and teachers may not appear to be very glamorous or significant. The gifts that caught the most attention, were the gifts of speaking in tongues that is speaking languages that an individual had never studied or previously known. Also the gift of miraculous healing. These signs were used by the Lord to confirm that certain groups of individuals were indeed included in in God's plan to receive the gospel and salvation, and to be included in the Church. It wasn't supposed to be about the individual, but all too often it quickly became about the individual who possessed the gift. Too often, at least to some degree, it became self-centered instead of Christ centered.

What Paul was saying was that these gifts that the Corinthian congregation was highlighting were in fact the less important gifts. They served God's purpose, and that purpose lasted until the Church was established among the gentiles and the New Testament canon settled. Then they ceased.

The gift to be desired, the gifts for which we ought to pray yet today, is the gift of speaking the truth of the gospel faithfully for others to hear and learn of the hope that is within us. "Faith comes by hearing and hearing by the Word of God." (Romans 10:17) Messengers must be sent out

into the world with that blessed gospel message of God's love and forgiveness that comes to us through faith in Christ Jesus.

It is with this encouragement that the Apostle Paul moves on to speak of --

II. A More excellent Way

Paul introduces the gift of Agape love. He does so by listing the insignificance of all those charismatic gifts if this wonder of love is missing. The speaking in tongues, even if it were the language of the angels, would be nothing but noise if love wasn't present. Even the greater gifts of prophecy or true spiritual understanding, even if one could understand all the very mysteries of God, would be nothing if it were missing the Agape love that takes the gift into action for the salvation of souls. Yes, even faith itself, a faith so great that one could remove mountains, would be nothing without love. And faith is one of the great necessary gifts of the Spirit, necessary for us to comprehend the gifts of Christ's grace and mercy for our salvation. And yet if it is missing the Spirit's gift of Agape Love, it falls flat. If one were to do mighty acts of valor, and even endure great persecution as a child of God, with no love it is of no value.

The next four verses of our text are the most familiar, and the ones that capture people's attention. When in the throes of romantic love young couples like to pretend that these verses perfectly describe themselves and their loved one. In fact the only person on earth that really possessed the qualities of this perfect love was Jesus. If one were to substitute anyone else's name in place of the word love, well it would be a farce. We are not as patient as love would require us to be. We all can be rude too often, and we certainly all seek our own interests and desires. We are provoked, and we do think evil of other people, regularly. Our sinful nature leads us to put self first, and this is contrary to the love that is in Christ Jesus.

The love of Christ is the more excellent way. That love possesses our hearts only when the Spirit makes us new creatures through faith in Christ. Christ Jesus came into this world to redeem us to God. He completed that mission of salvation, and called us wretched sinners to be His disciples. It the greatness of His love He entrusted us with the gospel. Here in this time of our earthly pilgrimage we cannot fully fathom the greatness of the love of God in Christ. Now we know only in part, and we are left with a lot of questions, a lot we don't understand. Sometimes we chaff under the rod of tribulation, not fully satisfied with the ways of the Lord in our lives, but as we are drawn closer to the Lord we grow and mature in faith. The childish, the selfish, the earthly and material, is less important. We are more ready to leave material things behind. The Lord is preparing us, readying us for the fruition of our faith when we shall see the Lord face and to face. Then we shall know the wonder of pure love.

Paul ends this section by highlighting for us the most precious gifts we each have received from the Holy Spirit. *"And now abide faith, hope, love, these three; but the greatest of these is love.* (v.13) Think about this for a moment; how often have you heard a fellow Christian say, "I don't know how people in this world make it without faith?" How precious our faith is that we know that the Lord only deals with us according to His grace and love, and that Jesus has secured a place for us in heaven. We know we can trust the Lord because He did sacrifice His Son to save us. If He did that, He will not forsake us or neglect us! That's our faith, that's our confidence that God's not only there, but that He cares for us and watches over us, and directs all things for our good and blessing. Add to that the hope of eternal life, that Jesus' rose from the dead, so we know resurrection is real. Jesus has gone before us to heaven to prepare a place for us, and He will call us to be with Him in heaven. That is our hope. It is our hope not because there is any uncertainty to it; that would be a wish. NO, it's our hope because in Christ it is a "done

deal!" It remains a hope only because our turn to receive that glory hasn't come yet.

Don't you agree that those are big and precious gifts of the Holy Spirit. Then there's love, agape love, a love we could not know apart from the Holy Spirit placing this gift in our hearts and making it a part of our lives. This is the one that I fear we undervalue. This is the love that moved God to save you. This is the love that led Jesus to go to the cross for you. This is the love that led the Holy Spirit to call you to faith, and instill within you that hope of eternal life. This love is what gives this mundane existence here on earth purpose and meaning, and this is the one gift we actually undervalue and under practice.

Put away childish things. As we grow in our appreciation of Jesus' love for us, we shall also seize the opportunities which the Lord places before us to walk in love, to love others even as Christ has loved us and given Himself for us. *"And now abide faith, hope, love, these three; but the greatest of these is love.* (v.13) The greatest of these is love because it is in practicing this love that the glory of Christ our Savior is revealed to the world through us, through you and me. The greatest of these is love because it is in the practice of this Agape love that we offer to God the true thankoffering of our hearts and lives, hearts and lives which were purchased and won by Jesus' holy precious blood and innocent sufferings and death.

"And now abide faith, hope, love, these three; but the greatest of these is love. (v.13)

AMEN.

And the peace of God which passes all understanding shall keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.