

# QUINQUAGESIMA

ANNO ⁂ DOMINI 2022

*"So now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; but the greatest of these is love."*

*1 Corinthians 13:13*

The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with you all. Amen.

In today's Gospel lesson, Jesus takes the Twelve and says to them, "See, we are going up to Jerusalem, and everything that is written about the Son of Man by the prophets will be accomplished. For He will be delivered over to the Gentiles and will be mocked and shamefully treated and spit upon. And after flogging Him, they will kill Him, and on the third day He will rise" (Luke 18:31-33).

It's hard to imagine words more fitting for today, the Sunday before Ash Wednesday and the start of the season of Lent. We, too, are going up to Jerusalem. About forty days from now, we will triumph with the crowd that welcomed Jesus into the City of David, waving palm branches and crying out, "Hosanna! Save us!" We will be taken aback with the disciples whose dusty feet were washed by the Holy One of Israel. We will marvel with the centurion who watched Jesus die and said, "Truly this was the Son of God!" And we will exult with the women who three days later heard the good news from an angel in white: "You seek Jesus of Nazareth...He is risen; He is not here" (Mark 16:6). What wondrous love is this!

And so, today we also get Paul's famous words on love from 1 Corinthians 13. Responding to a question about spiritual gifts, Paul writes at the end of chapter 12, "But earnestly desire the higher gifts. And I will show you a still more excellent way" (12:31). Spiritual gifts are "manifestations of the Spirit for the common good. For to one is given through the Spirit the utterance of wisdom, and to another the utterance of knowledge...to another faith...to another gifts of healing...to another the working of miracles, to another prophecy, to another the ability to distinguish between spirits, to another various kinds of tongues, to another the interpretation of tongues" (v. 31).

This is not an exhaustive list. Paul writes in Romans 12, "Having gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, let us use them: if prophecy, in proportion to our faith; if service, in our serving; the one who teaches, in his teaching; the one who exhorts, in his exhortation; the one who contributes, in generosity; the one who leads, with zeal; the one who does acts of mercy, with cheerfulness" (vv. 6-8). Spiritual gifts can even be people, since Paul says in Ephesians 4 that God "gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of

ministry, for building up the body of Christ” (Ephesians 4:11-12). And there, again, is the key: spiritual gifts are for the *common good*, “that there may be no division in the body, but that the members may have the same care for one another” (12:25). They are not for building up the self.

But that’s precisely what was happening at the church in Corinth. Those with the “higher” gifts of tongues and prophecy were using them to minister to and inflate *themselves*. They were treating their gifts as a status symbol, looking down on the so-called “less honorable” parts of the body of Christ, meaning those whose gifts were not as showy. The eye was saying to the hand, “I have no need of you,” and the head to the feet, “I have no need of you” (12:21). Paul will later call this way of thinking “childish” (13:11), but you have to admit, speaking in tongues does sound more impressive than the spiritual gift of serving. Who wouldn’t rather have prophetic powers or mountain-moving faith than, say, cheerfulness or generosity? That’s not to say there’s anything wrong with having the higher gifts. In fact, Paul says we should “earnestly desire” them (12:31).

But there is a still more excellent way. Getting into chapter 13, Paul writes, “If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. If I give away all I have, and if I deliver up my body to be burned, but have not love, I gain nothing” (vv. 1-3). You may recall a similar teaching of our Lord in the Sermon on the Mount: “On that day many will say to me, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many mighty works in your name?’ And then will I declare to them, ‘I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness’” (vv. 22-23).

Spiritual gifts are good, but even the most impressive works and manifestations of the Spirit are useless, even damning, if done for the self. That’s not the way of God. Imagine if Jesus had said to His disciples instead, “See, we are going up to Jerusalem, and nothing that is written about the Son of Man by the prophets will be accomplished. For He will not be delivered over to the Gentiles and will not be mocked and shamefully treated and spit upon. They will try to kill Him, but they will fail. For His followers will take the sword, and His earthly kingdom will rise.” That would be the way of the self, and we would *all* be damned because of it.

But Christ chose the more excellent way, the way of which Paul speaks: the way of love. Which begs the question, What is love? “Love,” says Paul, far from being self-serving, “is patient and kind; love does not envy or boast; it is not arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice at

wrongdoing, but rejoices with the truth. Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things" (13:4-7).

It is certain that what Paul has in mind here is the love of God in Christ Jesus. In contrast with the prideful, self-loving Corinthians, Paul presents the perfect paradigm of self-giving love: the cross. "For God shows His love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us" (Romans 5:8). He was patient and kind. "When He was reviled, He did not revile in return; when He suffered, He did not threaten" (1 Peter 2:23). He did not insist on His own way, ordering twelve legions of angels to come to His aid, but was wholly committed to the Father's will, not irritable or resentful of the burden He was made to bear, the burden of our sin, but eager and hopeful for what lay on the other side of the third day. He endured all things to His final breath. He endured all things for you. In this, Paul says, is love.

What's more, "Love never ends. As for prophecies, they will pass away; as for tongues, they will cease; as for knowledge, it will pass away" (13:8). Even faith and hope are temporary. The author of Hebrews defines faith as "the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen" (11:1), but sight will be granted in the life to come. "For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face" (1 Cor. 13:12). We are saved in the hope of redemption, but "hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what he sees?" (Rom. 8:24). So the greatest of these is love, because when Christ appears love will go on, and on, and on, into eternity. "The steadfast love of the LORD never ceases, His mercies never come to an end" (Lam. 3:22). His forgiveness is forever, and His sacrifice for all time.

And so, Paul concludes, "Pursue love" (14:1). Chase after it. Give up childish ways, and *deny* yourself. Say no to your sinful desires, especially your desire to be seen and admired for whatever gifts God has given you. On our own, this would be impossible. We are not by nature loving. We are takers, not givers. But because God loved the world by giving His only Son, love is now possible. "We love because He first loved us" (1 John 4:19). God's love enables us to love.

So, if you would pursue love, pursue the love of God in Christ Jesus. Gladly hear and learn His Word. Confess your sins and receive absolution. Partake of the very body and blood that was given and shed on the cross for you. Lent is the perfect season for this. With Ash Wednesday coming up and all the midweeks after that, Holy Week, etc. there are ample opportunities to receive this wondrous love. Pursue it. Fix your eyes on Jesus, and love will come. You *will* love, because God first loved you. Because He *loves* you. This is the way. See, we are going up to Jerusalem...

In Jesus' name. Amen.