

**THE GREATEST GIFT IS LOVE**  
**Sermon for the Fourth Sunday after the Epiphany 2022**  
**1 Corinthians 12:31b-13:13**

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

The text for our sermon today is the Second Reading from before, 1 Corinthians 12:31b-13:13: <sup>31b</sup> **I shall also show you what the best way is by far.** <sup>13:1</sup> **If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels but do not have love, I have become a loud gong or a clanging cymbal.** <sup>2</sup> **Even if I have the gift of prophecy and understand all mysteries and all knowledge and, if I have all faith so that I could remove mountains but do not have love, I am nothing.** <sup>3</sup> **If I give away all that I possess to feed the hungry and, if I give up my body to be burnt and do not have love, I gain nothing at all.**

<sup>4</sup> **Love is patient. Love is kind. Love is not envious. It does not brag or become conceited.** <sup>5</sup> **It does not behave dishonourably. It is not selfish. It does not become irritated. It keeps no record of wrongs.** <sup>6</sup> **It does not delight in wrongdoing but rejoices with the truth.** <sup>7</sup> **It covers everything in silence; it believes everything; it hopes for everything; it endures everything.**

<sup>8</sup> **Love never fails. If there are prophecies, they will be ended. If there are tongues, they will cease. If there is knowledge, it will be ended.** <sup>9</sup> **For we know in part and prophesy in part.** <sup>10</sup> **However, when what is complete comes, what is in part will be ended.** <sup>11</sup> **When I was a child, I used to talk like a child, think like a child and reason like a child. Now that I have become a man, I have ended childish things.** <sup>12</sup> **For now we see dimly in a mirror but then we shall see face to face. Now I know only in part but then I shall know just as I am fully known.** <sup>13</sup> **Moreover, now there remain these three: faith, hope and love. However, the greatest of these is love.**

Lord God, heavenly Father, sanctify us through Your truth, Your Word is truth. Amen.

Dear friends in Christ,

In the earliest days of the Christian Church, the Lord had gifted certain individuals with *supernatural abilities*. The Apostles of Jesus and St. Paul were able to perform miracles of healing - nowhere near on the level that Jesus had done them - but still, they performed them from time to time. This gift was given to confirm their message and to reinforce their apostolic authority. Others too were given gifts to a lesser degree; some to speak in languages they had never learned, others to prophesy future events like an upcoming famine or that Paul was going to be arrested and taken into custody, for example. We see these supernatural gifts becoming fewer and farther between as time went on because once the church was firmly established and widespread, they weren't needed as much. However, in that time when the Apostles were still alive and for some period afterwards, these gifts were not altogether uncommon.

Now, you would think that that would be a good thing, and in most places, it was. However, at the Church in Corinth, the supernatural abilities granted by the Holy Spirit were like fuel on the blazing fire of all their other troubles. Supernatural gifts of the Spirit (like all the good gifts of God) can be abused. They can be used for evil purposes as well as for good, and that is what was happening at Corinth.

The Church at Corinth had been divided into warring factions, each claiming its superiority over the rest. On an individual level, too, members of the church were at odds, each trying to prove that they were better than the others: somehow wiser, holier, more spiritual, more pious, more biblically knowledgeable, whatever. And if someone possessed a supernatural spiritual gift, they used it to show off - to prove what an extra-special Christian they were. Making matters worse, even members *without* supernatural spiritual gifts were pretending to possess them so that they could participate in this game of one-upmanship. They did this primarily by allegedly being able to speak in tongues and having the powers of prophecy. Why? Because they're the easiest to fake. If someone stands up and starts spouting a bunch of gibberish, who's to say they aren't speaking Swahili or some unknown heavenly language spoken by angels (as some of them claimed)? Likewise, with prophecy: you could make your "*word from the Lord*" sufficiently vague or cast it far enough into the future that no one could prove you wrong.

Knowing this, it's not hard to guess what the people in this congregation were constantly praying for: "*Lord, grant me ever more spectacular spiritual gifts - the kind that will impress others the most.*"

If you can recall, in last week's Second Reading<sup>1</sup>, we heard St. Paul taking the members of the Corinthian church to task for their unchristian attitudes and fractious behaviours. Using the analogy of a human body with the individual members of the congregation like the parts of the body - eyes, ears, hands, feet, and so on - Paul had explained how we are to see ourselves, namely, part of an organic whole, united by the one Spirit, each performing our own essential roles for the good of the whole body. We aren't in competition with each other. We're on the same side. What's bad for one is bad for us all. What's good for one is good for us all. And if in His wisdom the Holy Spirit grants you a gift, talent, or ability - whether natural or supernatural - it's not so you can puff yourself up with pride and bring glory to yourself; no, *it's so that you can use that gift to serve the needs of the other parts of the body*. Each one is to use the gifts that God gives **to support and enhance the whole**.

With this in mind, Paul then encouraged his hearers (and that would include us) to seek the greatest supernatural gift that the Holy Spirit gives, which is love, of which he says that without, is entirely useless. **"If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels but do not have love, I have become a loud gong or a clanging cymbal. <sup>2</sup> Even if I have the gift of prophecy and understand all mysteries and all knowledge and, if I have all faith so that I could remove mountains but do not have love, I am nothing. <sup>3</sup> If I give away all that I possess to feed the hungry and, if I give up my body to be burnt and do not have love, I gain nothing at all."** Without love, all these gifts are *completely useless*. So it is a good thing, therefore, that Paul goes on to define what this supernatural love is that he's speaking of; and it's good that he does.

We usually use the word "love" to mean romantic emotions or feelings of affection. That isn't what Paul is talking about at all. No, he means *divine love*: the kind God has for us, the love that Jesus had displayed for us when on the cross He suffered and died for our sins.

This love, Paul says, **"is patient."** It is not quickly or easily aroused to anger. It brushes off insult and abuse. It reflects and imitates God's patience<sup>2</sup> and the example of Jesus, who is *"gentle and humble in heart"* (Matt. 11:29). Such patience is a fruit of the Spirit.<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, this love **"is kind."** Again, God sets the example by showing unfailing kindness in the creation, preservation, and redemption of His people. So too, we ought to be favourably disposed to others and always seek their good.

Having described love's two most prominent positive features, Paul continues by saying that love is not **"envious."** This was the big problem at Corinth. The members were envious of the gifts others had. They weren't content with their own part in the body. Paul continues by saying that love **"does not brag or become conceited. <sup>5</sup> It does not behave dishonourably."** It is mindful of others' thoughts and feelings and avoids speech and behaviours that may cause offence. Love **"is not selfish."** It doesn't need to be in charge. It happily goes along with what's best for everyone. Love **"does not become irritated."** It's not grouchy or easily provoked by the offensive words or actions of others. Love **"keeps no record of wrongs."** Love forgives all offences and tries to forget them. It never dredges up old hurts and broods on them. It doesn't bring them up in an argument to remind the offender of what they had done. Love **"does not delight in wrongdoing but rejoices with the truth."** Sin of any kind in anyone is cause for sorrow. Love **"rejoices with the truth"** - and in particular, the truth of Christ that saves. Love **"covers everything in silence; it believes everything; it hopes for everything; it endures everything."** Covering everything in silence and enduring extends the idea of long-suffering patience while believing and hoping means to have firm faith in the Word and promises of God and to our certain hope of eternal life in the recreated heaven and earth.

Furthermore, this supernatural gift of divine love, Paul says, **"never fails."** It's what we'll be doing for all eternity. The other gifts the members at Corinth so coveted had a limited shelf life. They would all pass away in time. Paul writes, **"If there are prophecies, they will be ended. If there are tongues, they will cease. If there is knowledge, it will be ended. <sup>9</sup> For we know in part and prophesy in part. <sup>10</sup> However, when what is complete comes, what is in part will be ended."** Indeed, in our day, they are long gone. No one is out there being given new prophecies or performing miracles. Those who want to speak in other languages have to learn them the hard way. But love, the greatest of all the supernatural gifts of the Spirit, is the one that lasts forever.

Paul's point is that we can begin to exercise the gift right now. How? Not by digging deep within ourselves and

<sup>1</sup> 1 Corinthians 12:12-31a

<sup>2</sup> Romans 2:4; 9:22

<sup>3</sup> Galatians 5:22

trying really hard, that's for sure. Whatever we achieve that way will be exactly like those who had only *pretended* to have the gifts of tongues or prophecy. It will be fake love, only the surface appearance of it. No, the love we've been discussing is *supernatural*. It doesn't come from within but rather from the outside. It is given by God. And it is given when first we look inside ourselves and see that we don't have it naturally. Run down the list of love's attributes, and you'll see: "*I am not patient. I am often unkind. I am envious, a bragger and often conceited. I am selfish, irritable, and resentful.*" Then recognise and confess these things **for the sins that they are**. Receive again the Word of Christ's forgiveness - the forgiveness He achieved for us when He perfectly put divine love on display. By that Word of forgiveness and the power of His Holy Spirit working through His Word, He will cleanse our hearts and renew our minds to enable us to exercise the greatest and most enduring gift He has to give.

May we earnestly seek this gift that the Lord may fill us with it, now and always, through Jesus Christ our Lord. In His holy name. Amen.

The peace of God which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.

#### PRAYER FOR THE FOURTH SUNDAY AFTER EPIPHANY

Almighty God, Your ears are always open to the prayers of Your people, and You promise Your saving help in every time of need. Therefore we lift up our hearts to You.

We thank and praise You that You have enabled us to understand Your Word, and for the blessings of faith, love, and trust in You. Most of all, we thank and praise You for the coming of Your Son, and for His deliverance from our sin, from the condemnation of the Law, from our death, from the devil, and from hell. We give You humble thanks for all Your other gifts. You have bestowed Your Spirit on us through Jesus, Your holy Anointed One. Through Your Spirit give us a deeper knowledge of Your will, and a deeper faith in Your salvation. Continue to renew us by the Spirit also. Give us deeper love for all people. Keep us conscious of Your desire that we should spread the Good News about Jesus. Give us opportunities to tell the good news of the Gospel, and the courage to tell it; and strengthen us by the presence of Jesus, who has promised to be with us always in this task. Make us more aware of people's needs, that, in meeting them, they may see that we are credible witnesses of Him; and bless what we say.

We pray also for all our families. Bless each home with Your presence and the Spirit of Christ, that children may grow in favour with God and man, and that parents, by love and proper example, may maintain their homes in godliness. Grant that both children and parents may be eager to worship You, and may delight in serving Your Son in their daily lives.

Provide and maintain good government for us and for all people; give all in our nation high moral values and responsible citizenship.

Comfort and bless all among us who are afflicted in any way, that they may find release from their burdens and trials, and learn to know Your gracious will, and how to submit to it.

May we all, in the unity of the faith, and in the knowledge of Your Son, continually praise Your name and fulfil Your saving purposes in the world. We ask all these things in Jesus' name. Amen.

#### FOURTH SUNDAY AFTER THE EPIPHANY

Jeremiah 1:4-10, 17-19

<sup>4</sup> The Word of the LORD came to me, <sup>5</sup> "I knew you before I formed you in the womb. I consecrated you before you were born. I have made you a prophet to the nations."

<sup>6</sup> Nevertheless, I said: "Alas, O Lord GOD! Look! I do not know how to speak. For I am only a youth."

<sup>7</sup> However, the LORD told me: "Do not say, 'I am only a youth!' For you shall go to everyone to whom I send you and say whatever I command you! <sup>8</sup> Do not be afraid of them! For I am with you to rescue you," the LORD declared.

<sup>9</sup> Then the LORD stretched out His hand and touched

my mouth. The LORD told me: "Look! I have put My Words in your mouth. <sup>10</sup> See! Today I have appointed you to be over the nations and the kingdoms, to pull out by the roots and to tear down, to destroy and to demolish, to build and to plant. ...

<sup>17</sup> "However, you must tuck your tunic into your belt! Get up and tell them everything that I Myself shall command you. Do not be intimidated in front of them, that I may not shatter you in front of them! <sup>18</sup> Look! Today I Myself have made you a fortified city, an iron pillar and bronze walls against the whole land, against the kings of Judah, against its officials, against its priests and against the people of the land. <sup>19</sup> They will fight against you but will not defeat you. For I am with

you,” declares the LORD, “and I shall rescue you.”

1 Corinthians 12:31b-13:13

<sup>31b</sup> I shall also show you what the best way is by far. <sup>13:1</sup> If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels but do not have love, I have become a loud gong or a clanging cymbal. <sup>2</sup> Even if I have the gift of prophecy and understand all mysteries and all knowledge and, if I have all faith so that I could remove mountains but do not have love, I am nothing. <sup>3</sup> If I give away all that I possess to feed the hungry and, if I give up my body to be burnt and do not have love, I gain nothing at all.

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Luke 4:31-44

<sup>31</sup> Then He went down to Capernaum, a city in Galilee and was teaching people on the Sabbath. <sup>32</sup> The people were amazed at His teaching, because His Word had authority.

<sup>33</sup> In the synagogue there was a man who had a spirit of an unclean demon. He cried out with a loud voice, <sup>34</sup> “Ha! What do we have in common with You, Jesus of Nazareth? Have You come to destroy us? I know who You are, the Holy One of God.”

<sup>35</sup> Jesus rebuked him: “Be quiet and come out of him!” The demon threw him down in the middle of the crowd and came out of him, without doing him any harm. <sup>36</sup> They were all amazed and began to ask one another, “What kind of speaking is this, that with authority and power He gives orders to unclean spirits, and they come out?”

<sup>37</sup> The news about Him kept spreading to every place in

the surrounding region.

<sup>38</sup> Jesus left the synagogue and went to Simon’s home. Simon’s mother-in-law was suffering from a high fever, and they asked Jesus to help her. <sup>39</sup> He bent over her and rebuked the fever, and it left her. She got up at once and began to wait on them.

<sup>40</sup> When the sun was going down, all who had people who were sick with various diseases brought them to Him. He laid His hands on each one of them and healed them.

<sup>41</sup> Moreover, demons were also being cast out of many people, shouting, “You are the Son of God!” However, He rebuked them and would not allow them to speak, because they knew that He was the Christ.

<sup>42</sup> At daybreak Jesus came out and went to a solitary place. The crowds continued to look for Him. When they came to Him, they tried to keep Him from leaving them. <sup>43</sup> However, He told them, “I must tell the Good News of the kingdom of God in other cities also, because I have been sent for this purpose.”

<sup>44</sup> Then He kept on preaching in the synagogues of Judea.