

# “The Greatest of These is Love?”

1 Cor. 12:31b—13:13

Does anyone else feel like they should be at a wedding? First Corinthians chapter 13 is probably the most widely used wedding text ever. And there is certainly nothing wrong with that. It was read at our wedding. But the love of which St. Paul is speaking in our Epistle lesson is by no means only the love of husband and wife. It would be fair to say that maintaining marital harmony was most likely not Paul’s focal point in writing these words.

Paul was concerned about harmony within the family, but the harmony was not limited to earthly families living under the same roof. Paul was concerned with maintaining the harmony of God’s entire family of believers living and worshiping together under one roof.

If the members of the body of Christ – the church – do not have, and do not demonstrate, love for one another, the church is doomed to destruction. Paul tells us that love for our neighbor is the greatest Christian virtue and accomplishes and achieves the most within the Christian realm.

But how can love be greater than faith and hope? Those are certainly no small matters. After all, it is through our faith that God saves us. “We are saved by grace through faith.” And the hope of which Paul writes is no half-hearted longing for a better day – wishing that things would improve but doubting that they will. The hope of which Paul writes is our unshakable confidence that God will continue to fulfill His promises and bring us into our final inheritance.

Then how can love be greater than faith and hope? Love seems to be such a common commodity. We love our house; we love our cat (even though she hisses at most strangers and even at us when she is upset. We love her anyway.) We love a book; we love our favorite team (even though they don’t win as much as we want them to). The young couple goes on their second date and they tell each other, “I love you.” Two people will hardly know one another, yet they claim to be able to “make love?”

Love is a word that has lost its meaning in the language of the day. Paul tells us that love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not arrogant. It is not rude, it does not insist on its own way, it is not easily angered – it is not irritable or resentful. It does not rejoice at doing wrong – or as some translations say, “it keeps no record of wrongs.”

This type of love is greater than faith and hope, because if selfless, patient, forgiving love is absent within the church, the doctrine of the church – the teaching of the church – cannot remain pure, hearts will not be held together in unity; and where there is no union, there is no communion – there

is no fellowship; therefore the church is no longer one, and, as St. Paul says, faith and hope within that context mean nothing, because within that context they cannot be found. We might as well gather together and bang some gongs and clang some cymbals. All we would be doing is making noise.

Satan knows that seeds of anger, impatience, discord, and envy grow very well along-side the seed of the Gospel, and if allowed to grow can or will eventually choke out what was going to be a bountiful harvest for the Lord.

The love of which St. Paul speaks is the love of Christ that flows through God's people. It is only through a faithful relationship with our loving, forgiving God that we are able to truly love: that is, be patient, be kind, put the wants and needs of others before our own wants and needs, and keep no record of wrongs.

Love is found in a relationship where repentance and forgiveness is the norm. Those who have sinned are readily led to repentance. Those who are sinned against are not easily offended and are willing and ready to forgive. Whether in our marriages or any other relationship we have, it is the forgiveness that Christ has won for us that makes our love possible. God keeps no record of your wrongs, because they were washed away in the water and Word of Holy Baptism. God has completely forgiven you, because Christ paid the ransom price for your guilt with His own life.

The love of which the world speaks (young love, love at first sight, puppy love) is said to be a natural part of our lives. However, the love of which St. Paul speaks is very foreign to most of the population. True love is

natural only to God. True love cannot be found apart from God. Our human condition by nature is selfish, impatient, rude, easily angered, and holds a grudge for a long time.

Whatever love you have for the people in your lives can only be explained as a reflection, albeit a dim reflection, of the love God has for each of you.

And when we make mistakes (not if, but when we make mistakes), God's love that flows through us will give to us, as His children, the patience, and the kindness, and the forgiveness for one another which is necessary for our faith and hope to continue.

We are all part of God's family living under the same proverbial roof of God's House – not just here, but seven days a week. Like any family, squabbles and sibling rivalries will occur. Don't let those seeds of discontent take root and grow.

Be wise, be gifted, have a hope that endures and a faith that moves mountains. And let all of those gifts from God be seen in the love you show to your brothers and sisters in Christ and your friends and neighbors in the world. That is, let the patient, kind, forgiving love that Christ has shown to you be reflected in your marriage, in your family, in our community, and in our church.

Faith, hope, and love remain. And the greatest of these (curiously enough) is love. Amen.