

Bruton Parish Church
The Rev'd Josh Stephens
Sermon for the Fourth Sunday after the Epiphany
February 3, 2019

1 Corinthians 13:1-13

If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have 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 do not have love, I am nothing. If I give away all my possessions, and if I hand over my body so that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing.

Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never ends. But as for prophecies, they will come to an end; as for tongues, they will cease; as for knowledge, it will come to an end. For we know only in part, and we prophesy only in part; but when the complete comes, the partial will come to an end. When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child; when I became an adult, I put an end to childish ways. For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known. And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love.

Mother Church

One of the best and one of the hardest parts about being a Christian is that with following Jesus of Nazareth comes accountability. We are held accountable in many ways, including by the Scriptures, by the traditions of the Church, and by Reason.

Here's one example: when we say the Nicene Creed in a moment, it is not a time in which we recite something which we necessarily understand, or which we can explain conceptually. To think of the Creed in this way is to miss the point of it. Some people, in fact, skip parts of the Creed that they struggle to believe in, leaving out "born of the Virgin Mary" or "on the third day he rose again."

But the Creed is more important than your personal foibles with divine intervention. It's about being held accountable by a body of people—by the Church visible and invisible—and declaring that what the Church has believe at all times and in all places is true on a far deeper level than our tech-savvy, scientific minds can fathom. The Creed is more of a Pledge of Allegiance that Christians say, declaring that we are a part of the Body of Christ. In fact, it is the only pledge many Christians will say because, beyond all our other loyalties, we are accountable to Christ and to his Church.

It's hard to be held accountable in this way. It's hard to admit that we would rather do things our own way and that we think we know better. But of course, this kind of pride is nothing new. One might argue with some ease that to be human is to think that you know better. Our very creation story affirms this. Adam and Eve had it pretty good. Life in a beautiful place. Food. Companionship. The story says that God would even walk in the garden with the evening breeze.

They were given basic instruction that required trust of God but before too long they were rationalizing another way: "This tree doesn't look too bad," they said.

Examples of this abound throughout Scripture. The kings of Israel: Saul, David, Ahaz. Peter rebuking Jesus when he's told of the cross. And we continue to do this in our day, thinking that we know better and refusing to receive the basic graces that are at the heart of our Christian life. I know personally, my level of pride is truly exceptional. I often try to take what I would like from Christianity and leave the rest behind, as if I've graduated onto something better. Do you ever do that?

One of the greatest temptations of the Western Church is to create a Christianity of our own making, something that's a bit more convenient, that fits our schedule better. We think of Christianity as a grocery store whose aisles we walk, picking and choosing the ingredients for a meal of our own making, buying what we can afford and what we prefer to make sure it tastes nice to us and our families. But the feast—the meal—was never ours to make. The table has been prepared before us. The feast is simply ours to keep.

Perhaps the greatest way this afflicts the Western Church has to do with how we participate in life as the Body of Christ. Attendance in Church continues to decline. People are spiritual but not religious. We want to have our faith without having the Church, which is to have Christianity without having Christ. And often times, we make these moves subconsciously, or at least indirectly, by trying to package something we find meaningful and useful.

Let me give you a specific example: you know this reading that we just heard from 1 Corinthians. "Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrong doing, but in truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never ends." I would imagine you're familiar with this reading. In fact, raise your hand if you have ever heard this reading at a wedding? Most of you were hearing wedding bells when I just recited it!

The only problem with using this reading at weddings is that Paul isn't talking about romantic love at all. He's not saying, "Here is a Christian view of marriage." We have commandeered this reading, trying to make it about marriage, taking what sounds so nice and sweet, and adding flowers and a veil, romanticizing for ourselves.

Now I would concede that this is perhaps the greatest treatise on love ever written. Neither Dante, nor Shakespeare, nor Tolstoy, nor Steinbeck ever captured love so well as Paul did in 13 simple, short verses. But Paul was not talking about being married; he was talking about being the Church! He wrote to a congregation deeply divided by politics, scandal, worship wars, and he told them that to be the Church in a world where politics, scandals, and competing beliefs abound, you are going to have to learn to love each other.

In fact, Paul wrote that the way we love each other is by living together as the Body of Christ. "Don't you know that we are members of one another?" he wrote. Just like a hand and a foot make up your body, you each are members of Christ's body. And because of God's self-emptying love in Christ, the lesser members of the Body are held in greater esteem.

You can make this reading about marriage but you'd have to be making your marriage about being the Church! You'd have to make being a husband and a wife about discipleship! You'd have to strive to outdo one another in putting each other's needs before your own. But in doing that, we'd have to keep our families as part of this Church family because we wouldn't know how

to forgive each other, we wouldn't know how to be patient, we wouldn't know how to endure all things, if it weren't for Jesus the Christ.

We learn to love well by living as the Church with one another. The monastic vision says, "Like stones in a bag, we rub each other smooth." In other words, the accountability that I began with can only frame our lives and urge us grace-ward if we take time to gather each week as the Church.

Of course, we make this pride-filled move with all kinds of things in our lives, trying to take what we like and enjoy from Christianity and separate it from the living, breathing, loving Body of Christ. I often talk to folks who say that they don't make it to Church but they find time to pray each week. They play golf, they go sailing, they ride bikes, they garden. An active and faithful prayer life surely includes such individual prayer. But do you confess your sins on the golf course with a penitent church? Are you instructed in the Apostles' teaching there, in the breaking of bread and in the prayers? How can we walk away from the very thing which taught us what prayer was in the first place?

Others say, "Well, we don't really come to Church each week but we try to teach our kids to be moral people." You tell me: can you separate Christian morality from the rest of it?" Our prayer shapes our believing, does it not? Our ethics and values are not found in the moral situationalism of a scientific society but in the story of God incarnate, crucified, and risen—and in the people dedicated to living out that risen life together.

I think this message is especially important for us now for any number of reasons. We grow tired of institutions which can become ends in themselves. But the Church was never meant to be an institution in the first place. It may have buildings and classrooms and vestments and finance committees, sure, but at the heart of all of that is the living, breathing, Body of Christ. It's you and it's me. This is where we learn to be good spouses and parents and siblings, where we learn how to pray, where we learn morality. This is where we experience the grace which sustains us.

On a more local level, for us as the Body of Christ at Bruton Parish Church, we face an exciting and somewhat frustrating time in the months ahead when our building will be closed to us. We will be worshipping in the Parish House. It is going to give us plenty of opportunities to step on each other's toes. It would be tempting to check out for a while, to think that we don't need the Body of Christ for a time, but that's not true. It's never been true before and these weeks are no exception. The people around you are a part of you and we're all a part of God. St. Cyprian said it in the 3rd century and we say it now: "You cannot have God as your Father unless you have the Church as your mother." Amen.