

1 Corinthians 13:1-13

On the surface it appears that St. Paul would be in agreement with the Beatles; at least with one of their songs: "All You Need is Love." Paul, here, elevates love to a position superior even to faith and hope. Without love, he says, faith is not faith, and hope is of no value. And who are we to disagree? He's the apostle, we're not. But if one was to separate this chapter in First Corinthians from the rest of the Bible, it would leave much to be desired. And people do this. Even non-Christian couples do not mind having First Corinthians 13 read at their weddings. It speaks of love; that's it. There is no mention of God. It mentions angels briefly, but everyone likes angels. Christ Jesus is not anywhere in this chapter. And so it's very inoffensive. It is read for Christian weddings quite often. It could be read at a Mormon wedding, or a Buddhist wedding, or an Atheist wedding.

People can point to these words of the apostle and say, "Who needs Jesus? Love is all you need!" And there are people who live with this false thinking: "As long as I show love to others, I'll be fine both now and after I die." Even Christians can fall into this trap. As Christians we know we need Jesus. "But if I show lots of love in my life," we're tempted to think, "I don't need that much of Jesus." And so we plug Jesus in now and then. A worship service here and there. A Bible reading once in a while. And we're right there with the non-Christians in their attitude: "As long as you have love you'll be fine."

But isn't it interesting in our Gospel reading for today, Simon's mother-in-law had a high fever, and surely her family had love for her, but they could not help her. She needed Jesus to rebuke the fever for her. And the man who had the spirit of a demon inside of him--why didn't the townspeople stage a "love-in" for him to drive that demon out, if all you need is love? Again, it took Jesus. That man needed Jesus to rescue him.

Life is not all about love; it's about Christ. We need to understand something about First Corinthians 13...St. Paul did not write this chapter to non-Christians. He wrote it to those within the church; to men, women, and children who believe in Jesus, who cling to His words of life and are nourished by His flesh and blood in the Sacrament, who live in the water of their baptism. And St. Paul was not writing about the concept of love. He did not intentionally, or unintentionally, leave Jesus out of this chapter. Paul always proclaimed Christ. And so when he writes, "Love is patient and kind; love does not envy or boast, it is not arrogant or rude, it does not insist on its own way..." he does not want us thinking so much of a warm emotion or a noble ideal. Paul wants us to think of Jesus.

"God is love." When Paul writes of love, he writes of Christ. And so he can say, "If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not (Christ), I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal." Love does not make the world go round; Jesus does. The Beatles should retitle their song to "All You Need is Jesus," but they won't. And wouldn't it be something at an Atheist wedding for the Judge to read not, "Love is patient and kind..." but "Jesus is patient and kind; He does not envy or boast..." and so on.

St. Paul knows, what our world is ignorant of, that you cannot separate love from Christ. That's why the Apostle John writes that if we claim to believe in God but do not have love for our brother, we are liars. Love and faith are inseparable. You can't have one without the other. And where love and faith abide, there is also hope. These three, says Paul, "faith, hope, and love."

Now why does Paul put love at the top? Why is the greatest of the three love? Allow me to use a Haitian analogy. If someone were to say, "I believe in helping the people of Haiti," but he himself

gives nothing to help, does he really believe in helping them? Of course not. Love is putting what you believe into action. Of faith, hope, and love, the one which is visible is love. We cannot see faith and hope, but love we can see. Anyone can say, "I believe in God...I trust in Christ...I am a Christian." But when that faith is put into practice, we will see a love for God's Word, a love for His commandments, a love for others. Anyone can say, "I have faith," writes the Apostle James, but he goes on, "Now show me your faith in works of love."

So is St. Paul writing about God's love in our text, or about our love? Actually both. A few nights ago there was the first full moon of the new year. It was called the "wolf moon" because it was brighter and appeared larger than any other full moon. But there is no such thing as "moon" light. The moon reflects the light of the sun. When it's full, it's full of sunlight. In two weeks the moon will still be above us, but we will not see it, for it will not reflect any sunlight toward us.

The same thing is true of God's love and our love. As the moon has no light of its own, so we have no love of our own. Any love that is shown by you and me is Jesus' love being shown through us. When you give money to help the people of Haiti on your way out today, it's Christ loving the people of Haiti through you. When you are, as Paul says in our text, "patient and kind...not arrogant or rude...not insisting on your own way" and so on, you are like the moon reflecting God's love in your life. He loves in this way through you.

Without the sun, the moon is invisible. That's why St. Paul says that without love, faith and hope are nothing. It is Christ and His love for you and through you that makes you who you are--"wolf Christians" so to speak--full, shining people of God showing love in your lives.

But as you know the full moon doesn't last very long. One night, and then you see less and less of it until it's a new moon and you can't see it at all. Is that also true of our love? Are we full moons one day, and quarter moons the next? Are there days when we barely show love at all--love for others and love for God? When our planet Earth gets between the sun and moon, the moon becomes dark. It reflects no light at all. The problem is not with the sun. The sun is still shining brightly. The problem is that the world has gotten in the way. That happens in our lives as well. The world gets in the way of Jesus. It's so tempting to let earthly matters take priority over Christ and His Word. But when this world blocks out the light of the Son, we are living in darkness. The problem is not with God. His Word and Sacraments are given here regularly. His Word is studied here Sundays and Mondays. He is shining. His love for you is very real. The problem lies with us. Our love for God often waxes and wanes. Our love for others is not what it could be. And it's because we're keeping God's love for us in Christ Jesus, a little or a lot, out of our lives.

Remember, however, St. Paul's words, "Love is patient and kind..." And because God is love, that is how He is toward you. Even when we're so engrossed in worldly things that His love barely reflects off of us, His love for you is constant. He is patient, waiting for us to repent. He is kind and merciful. He does not desire to punish us although we deserve it. He is forgiving. He carries no grudge in His heart toward you and me.

When Jesus was on the cross it became totally dark for three hours. At that time we might say that God did not love His Son. He was angry with Him. He punished Him severely for all the wrongs that you and I have done. And during that time, Jesus was in agony for you. He was literally in hell. Your sins and mine blocked all the love which came from the Heavenly Father.

But now those sins are paid for. You do not need to live in the darkness. God's love shines on you in Christ. He forgives you completely. He loves you fully. And you, therefore, can be, and are people who leave this building as full moons. Full of the love of Christ. Full of His mercy. And others will see in your life the love of God in their Savior, Jesus. Amen.