

Sermon for the Fourth Sunday after the Epiphany

Faith, Hope and Love.

St. Paul's beautiful passage about faith, hope and love is a favorite text for weddings. Now, Paul isn't really talking about marriage here; nevertheless, I'm always happy to work with this perspective in a wedding sermon. But there's a lot more going on here. For instance, as Paul expounds on what is essential, it seems as though faith, hope and love, and most especially love, could have something to do with the *Missio Dei*, the Mission of God, which is on our minds this morning. But what, exactly, does 1st Corinthians 13 teach us about God's Mission?

Due in significant part to this congregation's generous support, (thank you all, by the way, for that generous support), my wife Shelee and I are living out our Christian vocations in Spain, where the Roman Catholic Church has been dominant for more than a millennium. In our Spanish context, the Roman understanding of love guides all their interpretation of Scripture. Their understanding of Christian salvation is of a process, begun by God's grace and the reception of faith, but which must be completed by the Christian through works of love. With this interpretive key, Jesus' actions in our Gospel reading provide us with the example we need: attaining salvation begins in Christ, but it is a lifelong process, or longer, in which our good works, our acts of charity, our love, are key. Within this hermeneutic, Paul's "faith, hope and love, but the greatest of these is love", hammers home the point. Missiologically then, in this interpretation, as Christians go about seeking the assurance of their own salvation, they are also spreading the kingdom of God.

This Roman theology is very attractive, because it makes sense to us, naturally. That is, our human nature, distorted by the fall into sin, naturally assumes that our best efforts are pretty impressive, and should have significant weight in our relationship to God, however we might define God. The typical "man on the

street” understanding of justification, that is, how we can stand righteous and acceptable before God, is the same in Spain as it is here and everywhere: “I’m a pretty good person, I do more good than bad, and I mean well. So surely God will accept me.” Roman Catholic theology connects this basic instinct to the story of Jesus Christ and sets it within a rich and rigorous liturgical and social structure. But at the end of the day it does not essentially change it.

There are of course at least two problems with this theology. First, our conscience isn’t buying it. We may swallow the scheme at one level, but our conscience seeks certainty, which, especially given the perfection of holiness that the Bible so frequently speaks of, is never to be found in our love. The hypocritical sinner, seeking to maintain the appearance of holiness, puts on an ever more desperate show, trying to plaster fresh whiteness over the rotting tomb of sinfulness within. The honest sinner is driven to despair, because there is no way our love meets any worthy standard, let alone the standard of the Holy Spirit revealed in the Bible.

Secondly, this understanding of love, as essentially being those good things we do to merit God’s ultimate favor, completely misses the point, not only of our Epistle and our Gospel, but of the entire narrative of Scripture.

Recently I have been spending time studying the beginning of Revelation chapter 2, with which Paul’s faith, hope and love passage has amazing interconnections. I am speaking of Jesus’ message to the Church in Ephesus, dictated through the Apostle John on the Isle of Patmos, where the apocalyptic vision of salvation was revealed to him. Jesus instructs John:

“To the angel of the church in Ephesus write: ‘The words of him who holds the seven stars in his right hand, who walks among the seven golden lampstands.

² “I know your works, your toil and your patient endurance, and how you cannot bear with those who are evil, but have tested those who call themselves apostles and are not, and found them to be false. ³ I know you are enduring patiently and

bearing up for my name's sake, and you have not grown weary.

⁴ But I have this against you, that you have abandoned the love you had at first.

⁵ Remember therefore from where you have fallen; repent, and do the works you did at first. If not, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place, unless you repent.

I can hardly imagine a sharper turn; Jesus starts out with high praise for the Ephesian congregation, who have done great works of perseverance, resisting evil, rejecting false apostles, enduring and bearing up for the Name of Jesus Christ, without growing weary. But...

But, you have abandoned the love you had at first. You must remember from where you have fallen, how things began in your Christian life, you must repent, you must turn back to the works you did at first, or, Jesus will remove your lampstand, which represents the Holy Spirit, and you will cease to be truly Church.

Again, if we understand love to essentially be **our** good works, and then we hear the literal words "do the works you did at first," it is easy to hear this passage as more confirmation of the basic formula: God's grace + faith + our good works can add up to salvation, ... eventually, ... maybe.

Of course, it might occur to you that this interpretation seems to contradict other famous passages like Romans 3: for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, ²⁴ and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, ²⁵ whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith... Or Jesus speaking to Martha in John 11: "I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, ²⁶ and everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die." Or again Jesus

in John chapter 6: “This is the work of God, to believe in the One whom He has sent.”

The natural human interpretation of love as our good works is incorrect, and entirely misses the central narrative of the Bible. Consider a moment the larger context of our Gospel reading, which is full of Jesus working very hard, doing amazing good works, amazing acts of love, casting out demons, healing the sick, working tirelessly. It is clear from this text, and many others, that good works are important to Christ. But notice that Jesus didn't keep doing them until the world was saved, which would fit with our natural theology. In fact, our Lord explicitly says that He cannot just stay in Capernaum and do miracles. He must move on to preach the Gospel. In the end, as important as serving people in their physical needs was, Jesus stopped doing it. Despite their value to those served, despite the power they revealed Jesus to possess, the miraculous healings and feedings of God's Son were **not** the main thing. In fact, as we read the Gospels, we see that all His works, all His miracles were prelude to defeat, prelude to suffering, prelude to death on a Roman cross.

Revelation 2, 1 Corinthians 13 and all the Gospel accounts of Jesus doing many good works are easily and frequently misinterpreted to reinforce our natural tendency to think our works are essential for salvation. This is certainly the case in Spain. What about here, in Mississippi? Do you know folks who think this way? What about you? Do you worry that you are not doing enough to placate God and earn His favor?

In this world where we are hard wired by sin to think religion is primarily about us and our good works done to please God, how do we get back to true love, to our first love? What does this little word “love” really mean?

What is love? We humans have mangled our understanding of this little word tremendously, leaving marriage and family and neighbors and nations with such a

deficient understanding that we are tempted to give up on love. We in our culture mostly misunderstand love as fulfilling our own desires for pleasure, or as a way to virtue signal our moral superiority, or simply as an empty word that does not endure beyond the pleasure of the moment.

But. But, this misunderstanding of love will not stand, for the Holy Spirit has gone out of His way to ensure that His Church has a clear understanding of what love really is, so that by His grace we can return and rejoice in the truth of love, which bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

True love is so powerful because, as we know from God's own Word, **God** is love. God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit is love, and the only source of all true love in the world. In this is love, not that we loved God, but that He loved us, giving His only begotten Son as the propitiation, the atoning sacrifice, for our sin. The Cross of Christ, that total defeat, that terrifying moment when the wrath of God against human sin was unleashed on God's own Son made man, that Cross is love, enacted and revealed. Jesus willingly sacrificing Himself to save sinners, even to save His enemies and tormentors, is love, the revelation of His love for His own eternal Father, and of His love for all of us sinners.

All those other loves, all of humanity's best efforts at loving one another, are at best derivative, secondary and dependent on God, who is love. To have any real and eternal value, our love must flow from the love of God who gave His Son into death, so that we might live in Him. Separate from the love of God in Christ, our efforts at love are always stained and distorted by our sinfulness. Only when we stand righteous in Christ can we love with a love that is true.

So, we see that our love toward others cannot be our **first** love, because without first having Christ, we do not love purely. So also, **our** love toward God and neighbor cannot be greater than faith and hope. For it is faith that connects us to Christ, and which gives us the eternal hope that motivates our works of love.

God is our first love, that love received by the power of the Holy Spirit, the love in Christ given to us through His Word, that made us and keeps us Christians.

So, in Revelation 2, Jesus is calling His people back to their first love, which is the repentant reception of His forgiveness, won on the Cross, and delivered daily through Word, Water, Wheat and Wine. This divine love is greater than even faith and hope, because faith trusts in what cannot yet be seen, and hope counts on the sure promise that someday soon we will see Him face to face. In that great day, faith and hope will be fulfilled in the glorious presence of the love of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, forever and ever, Amen.

Speaking about the Mission of God then, we do well to speak of First Love Mission. That is to say, we do well to focus on keeping first things first in our Christian life and our Christian witness and outreach. Our first love is Christ's love toward us. The Main thing in Missions is Christ for sinners, Christ for you, at the center of all we do.

Certainly, good works are important. Jesus helped many people, freely and at great personal sacrifice. So also for us, it is good to help our neighbors. Even more, when Christians serve others freely because of the love we have received in Christ, God does things in the midst of that outpouring of love, things like causing people to ask why we do what we do. Things like creating opportunities for His people to speak His Name in love, and to invite others to come and hear.

Paradoxically, the good works that Jesus did led to His Cross, through the envy and hatred of His enemies. Our good works, empowered by God's sacrificial love, still lead to Jesus' Cross. For in Jesus, the Cross of suffering and death has been transformed into the Cross of Love poured out, the Cross that leads to an empty tomb, the Cross that reveals that God in Christ has done it all, and continues to do it all, through the Gospel preaching, through the Gospel washing, through the

Gospel meal, through which he shares His divine and eternal love, through the forgiveness of all your sins, and the sins of the whole world.

This is the message that God is leading us to share from the Lutheran Mission in Spain, and this is the message of the Mission that God is accomplishing here, through Christ Lutheran Church in Jackson, Mississippi. We are privileged to be called together into First Love Mission, always keeping the proclamation and delivery of the love of Christ for sinners at the center of all we do, and holding that love up to our neighbors, so that the Spirit may draw many into His Church, in the Name of Jesus, Amen.

Preached by Rev. David Warner, Missionary to Spain

Sermon Text: 1 Corinthians 12:31-13:13