

*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. <sup>2</sup> 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. <sup>3</sup> 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. <sup>4</sup> Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant <sup>5</sup> or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; <sup>6</sup> it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. <sup>7</sup> It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. <sup>8</sup> 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. <sup>9</sup> For we know only in part, and we prophesy only in part; <sup>10</sup> but when the complete comes, the partial will come to an end. <sup>11</sup> 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. <sup>12</sup> 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. <sup>13</sup> And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love. I Corinthians 13 RSV*

This is perhaps one of the most beautiful passages of the New Testament. It is a favorite of many, and it can be heard at many weddings. However beyond the beauty of that passage is a commitment to a concept of love that is never at the forefront of our minds. Even the word love here, taken back to its' original Greek, has a challenging meaning for us far beyond our usual uses for the word love. You see in Greek there are three words for love. One word designates the "physical attraction of love", and then another designates the "friendship "aspect of love, and finally the third is "sacrificial love". The third is also mainly used to speak of God's love for humankind, as well as love that sacrifices for the other person.

It is the third word that Paul uses in this passage, a sacrificial love that puts the other person first. Paul used that word because the church he was writing to started devolving into "cliques". Members were preferring one leader over the other, valuing one person who had one particular spiritual gift over someone who had another, and at fellowship meals didn't share equally between rich and poor. So Paul wanted them to aim higher than the selfishness they were exhibiting.

So perhaps we can get a better sense of why Paul defined love the way he did. Certainly all the attributes for love found in the passage have little to do with self but in a relationship with others. While none of us could say that we have been entirely or even partially faithful to his listed attributes for love, Paul writes it because there was one who fulfilled all the attributes for love, Jesus Christ. In fact I once heard someone say that in the list of attributes for love; one could take out the word love, and put in Jesus. By reading it with the substitution of "Jesus" we could agree that Jesus is like each of those attributes listed.

Sadly however the church many times while admiring the message of Paul's great words on love, has not always put it into practice as it should. Consider this story told by a pastor :

*I read an article once that stated that waitresses and waiters complained that Sunday was the worst day of the week to work. I thought, as I read this article, that my faith was going to be strengthened by what I was about to read. I thought the article would state how these servers*

*would rather be with their families worshiping in church. I was disheartened when the article went on to say, that the servers complaint was, on Sunday's the restaurants are filled with impatient, rude and sometimes obnoxious people dressed in their Sunday best, who rarely if at all ever gave a tip. Now apparently these Christians had forgotten what they had just heard at Worship or in Bible class. Something as simple as Christ's command to love each other - couldn't be accomplished 30 minutes after hearing the command.*

On other hand, the church's great positive witness to the world has come from the kind of love that Paul expressed.

So then what will we be known for, as individuals or as a church? Consider these two tombstones:

*Here lies a miser who lived for himself,  
And cared for nothing but gathering wealth.  
Now where he is or how he fares,  
Nobody knows and nobody cares."*

*"Sacred is the memory of General Charles George Gordon, who at all times and everywhere gave his strength to the weak, his substance to the poor, his sympathy to the suffering, his heart to God."*

So which of the tombstones would you like as your legacy? Or as the sentiments expressed be a statement about the church? I think all of us would want to be known as along the lines of the second.

*And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love.*

Pr. John Van Haneghan