

“The 'L-Word”
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I Corinthians 13:1-13 Homily
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If I've said it once, I've said it a thousand times; it never ceases to amaze me how often and well the Holy Spirit manages to work through the lectionary texts, how frequently the timing of the texts corresponds so closely to events in the life of our church or the world. I, at least, think it is appropriate and good to speak of love on our last day together as pastor and people. However, for those who aren't there, the lectionary editors also included a Plan B. In today's gospel text, Jesus concludes his sermon at his hometown synagogue, only to find the congregation furious with him over the words he has just spoken. So angry, in fact, that they drive him out of town toward a cliff, with every intention of hurling him off of it...if only Jesus hadn't disappeared into thin air first! ...And so you see, the bible offers us a range of perspectives,...and the Holy Spirit apparently has a sense of humor.

This is one of those texts that is so familiar; it's almost too familiar, trite. How many times have you heard it read at a wedding? It's hard to get a couple not to choose it. And yet, the apostle Paul wasn't speaking to brides and grooms, but to the local church at Corinth--a congregation, which, as we discussed last week, had some issues and was behaving in a less than loving fashion. Its members and friends were competing with one another over spiritual gifts instead of using them as intended, to serve and glorify God.

Coming from Paul, that makes a little more sense, doesn't it? Flowery doesn't tend to be his style. If anything, Paul is at times perhaps a little too brutally honest. Sometimes he is downright prickly! And so, with that in mind, listen again to the first six verses of I Corinthians 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.

Come to find out, not only is Paul telling the Corinthian people what love is, he's pointing out to them all the ways they're falling short and just how unattractive and counterproductive that is.

Ouch!

You know what, though? I have to admit that, when I realize that this is what Paul is doing here, I experience an immense sense of relief. Why? Because, when I hear this passage, I can't help but note all the ways in which I fall short. There are lots of people and critters I love in a lot of different ways: my family, my friends, my pets, you--my Cadillac church family... But have I always, without fail, been patient, kind, and non-irritable with you and all these other mammals I claim to love? Not so much. I've gotten up on the wrong side of the bed. I've had my buttons pushed... If I dwell too long on the ways in which I have fallen short, I can start to doubt and to judge myself harshly against Paul's love measuring stick. To feel unloving and unlovable. Maybe to get angry with Paul and understand a little better how and why Jesus' hearers might have been compelled to drive him out of town. It helps to know that I probably have some company in this. That the Corinthians probably caught Paul's drift and knew that, every time Paul said what love was not, he was actually calling them on their bad behavior.

Nevertheless, it's still hard to completely shake off some feelings of resentment toward Paul. I mean, who did he think he was? How often has the tone in his letters sounded a little cranky or

self indulgent to our ears? I've often wondered how likeable a guy Paul was, let alone how loving or lovable. Clearly he wasn't perfect by a long shot...

But that's just it. Paul wasn't writing to the Corinthians in accusatory "you" language. He wasn't saying, "If you speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have love, you are nothing but a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal," or "If you give away all your possessions, and if you hand over your body so that you may boast, but do not have love, you gain nothing." No, throughout the text, Paul says "I," and a few times "we." This was probably partly for diplomatic reasons, yes. But I believe it was a lot more than that. I believe Paul was taking ownership of the fact that, he, too, loved imperfectly. And, ultimately, I believe Paul was making some broader theological and anthropological points. That is, I believe he was saying that human beings love imperfectly and that he was using divine love—God's love—as the measuring stick and the goal for our human relationships... We do the best we can, but, inevitably, we all fall short. We see in a mirror dimly. We know only in part. We start as children and put aside our childish ways again and again as we strive to grow and mature into spiritual adulthood.

That feels better, right? Better than Paul pointing a finger at us from on high?

The thing about preaching is that, to be done with depth and integrity, the preacher must speak as much to him or herself as to the congregation. To own the fact that she is also a member of that congregation and a part of its dynamic. To own that we are all on a spiritual journey and not one of us has reached its apex yet. And so here, you see, Paul is also providing us with a model for preaching and leading with integrity. He is owning his imperfection, even as he is encouraging his congregation and himself to strive for something better. And that may actually be a good model for the people sitting in the Corinthian church pews as well.

So how about us? What does this text have to say to us today, on this day of endings and farewells? I think it gives us an opportunity to own that we have cared for one another over these past three years as human beings. That, by definition, that means imperfectly. I think it gives us an opportunity to reflect on how much we have learned and grown together in that time. We see in the mirror a little less dimly than we did in 2010. We have come to understand and to trust one another more. We still know one another only in part, but certainly more fully than we once did. --And, frankly, only God can know each one of us completely anyway.-- This text also invites us to enter into and inhabit a place of grace. A place where we can recognize that each one of us is a human being, at once quirky, beautiful and broken. And so, almost by definition, we can't help but disappoint one another from time to time, but also to forgive and to delight in one another and the ministry we have done together.

As I depart this place today, I want you to know that, even as you have challenged me, you have blessed me greatly. What an honor it was to walk with you through the Open and Affirming process. What a joy it was to baptize Mary's twin grandsons and Junior, Tasha, and Ashley. What a delight it was to bless your pets, to bowl badly with you at the Pines, to walk Robin's and Lowell's land, to sing Christmas carols to our shut-ins and celebrate afterwards at the Zolynskys'. How poignant and painful it was to serenade Candy in her last days, to mourn her passing, as well as those of Francis, Vi, Mary, Joanne, and the Parrettes. What a blessing it has been to host GALLEY, to feast and screen movies together, to attend my first Gay Pride event with Troy and Bob and Sue; to provide a venue for ecumenical dialogue about homosexuality and the bible, to receive new members into our family a couple times each year. What a stretch and a challenge it was for all of us to live through conflict and loss, but then an achievement to work through and transcend it.

Know that I cherish these memories and that I will carry the images of your beautiful faces with me to Massachusetts. Know that you have taught me so much, and that it will benefit not only me, but everyone I will go on to pastor in the coming months and years. Know that you are the salt of the earth and the light of the world, and that your presence and your progressive voices make a difference. Know that I will hold you in my heart always, that I love you, “my salt of the earth people”--God’s salt of the earth people, and that love never ends.

God bless. Namasté. Amen.