

Rev. Danny Mackey
Quinquagesima
February 11, 2018
1 Corinthians 13:1-13
Grace Evangelical Lutheran Church in Muncie, Ind.

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Savior Jesus Christ.

And I will show you a still more excellent way (1Co 12:31b).

I don't know if those who devised our lectionary chose this Sunday's Epistle lesson because of its connection of love and Valentine's Day. In fact, even though Valentine's Day and the season of Pre-Lent coincide quite often, and even though Valentine's Day has been celebrated for over 1,500 years, I don't think the connection is intentional. Yet, since all the stores have shelves overflowing with stuffed hearts and candies and cards, and since turning on the radio or the television or social media is just love, love, love—well, we might as well take advantage of how well St. Paul's chapter of love fits with the secular holiday.

What!? St. Valentine's Day is a *secular* holiday? Sure, it is. Unlike Christmas, which the world has tried to abscond with for quite some time but hasn't quite managed, St. Valentine's Day hasn't been so fortunate. The steady secularization of the holy day began over 500 years ago and today it's almost unrecognizable to the Church. Think about it. It was originally a commemoration of St. Valentine of Rome's martyrdom on February 14, 269. The paraments are red when we remember those martyred for the faith—that's why red is associated with St. Valentine's Day. But do we really talk about martyrdom on February 14? In fact, do we even talk about *St. Valentine*? Nah, it's just Valentine's Day.

We might tell stories about some Valentine—a different one, mind you, than the martyr previously mentioned—apparently, there were quite a few martyred Valentines in the early Church. If we do, the stories are about the jailer's blind daughter being healed by Valentine. Valentine, according to the History Channel and American Greetings, wrote a letter to the now-seeing jailor's daughter and signed it 'Your Valentine' ... and thus created the whole greeting card industry? And then we turn a kind note from an imprisoned priest to a young girl into some romance.

In fact, the whole "romance" of Valentine's Day didn't appear until the 1300s—over 1,000 years from the first-of-his-name Valentine to be martyred. This doesn't really surprise me. After all, we're pretty confused when it comes to love. I think our confusion

might be because of the English language. We've got the one word "love" to cover all sorts of things; whereas, the Greek of the Bible has three distinct words for "love."

The first word for love in the Greek is *philia*. *Philia* means a friendly love or affection. It's the type of love that exists between brothers and sisters. Indeed, the city name Philadelphia means "brotherly love." It's the type of love between friends and denotes fondness. If you were to say "I love pizza" in Greek (and who doesn't, right?), you'd use the verb form of *philia*. Unfortunately, this type of love is actively battled against in our society. Everything has been turned into Greek's second word for love.

The second word for love, although it's the least common, is *eros*. *Eros* means desire. *Eros* was the Greek god of love, or, more accurately, sexual attraction. Cupid is *Eros*'s Roman counterpart. You've heard of Cupid, right? If I'm not mistaken, he's got something to do with Valentine's Day. Anyhow, *eros* is what most of our marketing and romantic comedies and society mean when they say "love." Understanding love as *eros* is why people say guys and girls can't be friends. It's why people suspect two people of the same sex when they obviously have deep affection for each other. It's why all the other types of love are contrasted with *eros* in our culture. How about "bromance"? *Eros* and its romance is what we think when we talk about Valentine's Day and love in general.

The last word for love in the New Testament is *agape*. *Agape* is delight and charity. *Agape* is the love of God for human creatures and of human creatures for God. This is the word St. Paul uses in his chapter of love. Now, I don't want to upset you if you had 1 Corinthians 13 read at your wedding. It's really quite common for it to be read at weddings. Actually, I was visiting with a dear saint this week and said "1 Corinthians 13," and she said, "Oh, that reading we get at weddings?" That's how common it is. I think I even heard it read on my wedding day.

Well, it just goes to show you that we are thinking about *eros* and romantic love on wedding days. But even in Ephesians 5, when the Holy Spirit says that husbands ought to love their wives and wives ought to respect their husbands, this *agape* word for love is used instead. That's because Ephesians 5, like our lesson, isn't merely about how we are to love one another, but rather it's primarily about God's love for His human creatures. And so, when we hear 1 Corinthians 13 or Ephesians 5 at weddings—and they're both excellent lessons for the Rite of Holy Matrimony—they might not mean what we think they mean.

Those passages are about God's love for us. And the love a wife has for her husband or a friend for another ought to be a reflection of that same godly love.

And so, when St. Paul writes our lesson to the Corinthians, he begins it by chastising them for their wrong idea of love. He points out that their idea of love is to be without love actually. They claimed prophetic powers and understanding of all mysteries and all knowledge, and they even claimed they were giving up their bodies for martyrdom. However, it was all a form of self-glorification and boasting. If it's focused on one's self, then it isn't, says St. Paul, true love. It's just a noisy gong, a clanging cymbal. At best it's an annoyance. Ultimately it's nothing.

After rebuking the Corinthians—and us, too, for our false love toward God and toward one another—the apostle tells us what love, *agape*, is. He describes it by its characteristics, both positively and negatively. It's patient, that is, long-suffering. It puts up with abuse. Most certainly, God has long-suffered hatred from His human creatures and this world, but still He loves us. It is kind, meaning that it seeks the good of the other without thought for itself. It's a sacrificing love, not a self-serving love. How does Jesus describe it? Jesus says, "No greater love than this: that One lay down His life for His friends" (Jn 15:13).

St. Paul continues, "Love does not envy or boast." Envy is when we begrudge another's possessions. Boast is when we say, "Look at me and at what I've got." Both are about possessing. And too often we talk about possessing and owning that which we love. "Be mine" looks cute on little confectionary hearts, but it's not true love. Rather, I like the "I'm yours" hearts instead because true love, *agape*-love, godly love, is a love that gives of itself to the other. When St. Paul speaks of husband and wife belonging to each other it's not in the sense of possession but with the idea that we are to care for each other just as we'd care for ourselves. In the Golden Rule, Jesus says, "Love your neighbor as yourself" (Mk 12:31).

Love isn't arrogant or puffed up. It doesn't have a big head, thinking too highly of itself. This is a huge problem for us. After all, doesn't the universe revolve around me? No? Oh, it revolves around you. Sorry. That's our sinful nature, which is always curved inward. Our sinful nature cries "What about me?" and "I'm important!" because it thinks first and foremost about itself. It questions authority and challenges those God has put over them. It chafes when others don't do what it tells them to do—although, when you consider that every person has a sinful nature and feels and acts the exact same way... Well, you can see

the problem. It gets angry and behaves inappropriately when it doesn't get what it wants. That's why St. Paul connects arrogance and rudeness in our lesson. "[Love] does not insist on its own way."

Love, the apostle continues, isn't easily provoked, that is, it takes a bit to set it off. Or, as the psalmist describes God, He is "slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love" (Ps 103:8). Nor is love "resentful," meaning bitter and angry at being treated unfairly. Consider for a moment just how we human creatures have treated our Creator. Thank God He's not resentful. Elsewise, this whole thing would've been wiped out long ago and no one would've been saved.

None being saved and all life being wiped out would be a great evil. And so love doesn't delight in the evil, but rather it rejoices in the truth. The Lord says, "I desire not the death of the wicked" (Ezk 33:11). And the "grace and truth" Jesus teaches is that "Because God loved the world by the giving of His only Son, whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life" (Jn 1:17; 3:16 *paraphrased*).

If you haven't picked up on it yet, when we're talking about this love, we're really talking about God. The disciple of love, St. John, writes, "God is love. In this the love of God was made manifest among us, that God sent His only Son into the world, so that we might live through Him. In this is love, not that we have loved God but that He loved us and sent His Son to be the propitiation [that is, the atoning sacrifice] for our sins. Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another" (1Jn 4:8b-11).

Christ's love bears all things; it bore all our sins on the cross. Another translation for "bear" is "protect," or as Apostle Peter writes, "covers" as in "Love covers a multitude of sins" (1Pt 4:8). Christ shed His blood for us on the cross and has covered our transgressions with His blood. In so doing, Christ protects us from the Father's fierce wrath.

Now, our translation says that love "believes all things." Does that mean love is gullible? Not at all. Rather, I think St. Paul is going back to an earlier statement made in chapter 1, namely, "God is faithful" (1Co 1:9). In other words, love doesn't break its promises. That's a pretty big one, right? If only we didn't break our promises to each other! The divorce rate would... Well, if no one broke a promise, there wouldn't be a divorce rate. Instead, we'd be free to "hope all things" and that hope would sustain us so we could "endure all things."

This love is permanent, without end, everlasting, eternal even. God's love for us, His human creatures, never ends and never ever fails. The things of this world like prophesy and ecstatic speech and secret knowledge—along with heaven and earth, those will pass away, but God's Word will remain forever (Mt 24:35). Now, we don't see things as they truly are. We only see part of the picture, as in a glass darkly, as children who can't fully comprehend what adults are doing or saying. But we shall know and see and understand, even as God fully knows us, on the Last Day. St. Paul writes that the Lord, who has begun a good work in us, will bring it to completion in the day of our Lord Jesus Christ (Php 1:6).

On that great Day of our Lord's reappearing, we shall behold Him in which we believe. And, beholding Him, faith will cease because faith is trusting in that which one cannot see. Likewise, God will give us all that He has promised. And, receiving the promises, hope will go away because hope is expecting to receive something promised. And the only thing that will be left is love, and that's why it's the greatest. We will have love, and have it abundantly, because we will have God Himself.

In Jesus' love.

The peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in + Christ Jesus.