

No word in the English language has suffered more than the word, “Love.” Words are spoken and written symbols of realities, but, like other symbols, their power to convey meaning can be diminished through ill-use. Imagine a crisply-minted one-hundred dollar bill: The finely-woven fibers of the paper, the clear and distinct image of Benjamin Franklin, the legible text promising that this Federal Reserve Note is a true and legal symbol of wealth, of the power of purchase, of good faith between citizens of the American republic and its government. Let's say it enters circulation in 1958. Now we find it, sixty years later, torn and greasy, crumpled and faded, so badly disfigured that it is an open question whether any sane bank-teller would accept it as currency. We can only guess as to the negligence that accounts for its current state. We can only guess what series of transactions, its history of passing from hand-to-hand and pocket-to-pocket, has rendered it practically unusable. Something like this has happened to “Love” in our language, and we peer at it now, as if we behold a faint or distorted photograph behind clouded glass. The word has become cheapened, as the Southern author Walker Percy once observed, “like a worn-out poker chip.”

Perhaps it is a happy accident then that the old Authorized Version, instead of using the common English “love” to translate that famous passage from St. Paul's letter to the Corinthians, our epistle text for today, instead provides us with the word, “charity.” Of course, the use of this word comes with its own set of difficulties, for we are used to using “charity” to describe donations to those in need, or the organizations that receive and distribute donated aid. The problem is, as many of you already know, that the world in which the Christian faith was born and grew did not have a generic word for “love,” as English does, but many words, all of which described a peculiar set of emotions, responsibilities, and attitudes, which corresponded to different kinds of human relationships. I can't do much better than to recommend the work of C.S. Lewis, who wrote *The Four Loves* to introduce modern audiences to these ancient ideas, if you want to understand them more fully. There is actually a wonderful series of videos on YouTube, featuring audio of Lewis himself reading chapters from that book, and accompanied by animated doodle-like illustrations. To make a long story short, the ancient Greeks and Romans recognized three loves: *Eros* or *Amor*, meaning romantic love between a man and a woman; *Philia* or *Amicitia*, meaning friendship; and *Storge* or *Pietas*, meaning the dutiful affection of close relatives or even fellow-countrymen, one to another. If each of us thinks deeply enough about these loves, it is not usually difficult for us to understand them. After all, most healthy human lives are lived out in varied patterns of romance, friendship, and family, though each of these relationships bring with them their own troubles and potential pitfalls.

The Christian scriptures, however, lit on and began to employ a little-used Greek word to describe the love of God for man, and the higher love toward which Christians were called, in imitation of that Divine love. This, of course, is *Agape*, or in Latin, *Caritas*—from which we get the “Charity” supplied in the King James. This love, higher than the others, is that which governs, enlivens, and brings to greatest fruition all other loves. But what is it? What does it look like? There is something in all human loves that hints at the reality of the Divine love; this, I think, is the reason that the scriptures use images of all three human loves to refer to this greater and transcendent love; we can even think of the Trinity itself in correspondence with them. God is our Father; we respond to him with filial affection, and He assures us of his paternal care. God the Son, as we had occasion to observe some weeks ago, describes Himself as the Great Bridegroom, to whom the Church is united in a way so intimate, that only the metaphor of

marriage seems to suffice. God the Holy Spirit, poured out into the hearts of men, draws us up into the life and society of the Triune Godhead, making each of us, like Abraham the Patriarch, the “friend of God.”

These images—the parent, the lover, the friend—are happy images, more or less for each of us, depending on our personal experience of human life. It's a truism, I think, that a human being who has not known any of the three loves, or whose experience of all three has been irrevocably poisoned by tragedy or malevolence, is a desperate and miserable being indeed. But even the knowledge of all three human loves, partially or wholly according to individual experience, does not do justice to the transcendent Love of God. To the three happy images of love, God Himself must provide a fourth and final image; rather, not an image, but a living reality, in which we will see love, not in enigmatic pictures, but, as St. Paul has it, “face to face.”

The human mind, however, recoils from this vision. As it was to the disciples as Christ led them toward Jerusalem, at first we understand none of these things, and the saying is hid from us. It is too strange, too hard, too overwhelming. And the saying is this: “Love endures all things.” Love will be mocked, spitefully entreated, spitted on, scourged, and put to death, and on the third day, He shall rise again. The cross is Love. It is God on the cross that endures all things and all men. We are so often blind to this reality, in practice if not in theory. Rather than look upon and accept this revelation of Divine love, how often do we, in the inner rooms of our hearts, take Christ aside and begin to rebuke Him, like Peter: “Lord, you will by no means do this thing”? For Christ not only shows this enduring love towards us, accepting the shame of the cross, taking on himself the burden of sin and death, but this is the love into which He summons us in our baptism. This is the love we have received, and it is the love which our Savior commands us to live.

God endures us, in all our maddening imperfections, our inconstancy, even in our moments of most vile sinfulness; he endures us as He endured the whips and nails of a violent and unjust execution. Despite all that we have done, are doing, or are yet to do, God sees in man not an enemy to be crushed, but He beholds us as those who are spiritually blind, begging for the paltry change of the world, the sum and total of which can not begin to touch or repair our true sickness. To us, blind men, God has condescended, in the person of Jesus, the Son of David, to pass by. If we are, like the blind man on the road to Jericho, aware of our own blindness, if we will call out to him, refusing to hold our peace, ignoring the rebukes of those around us, and if we ask to receive our sight, then let us be prepared for what we must see. That perfect love which endures will neither pass away, nor pass us by. Instead, He will command. What Jesus says to the blind man, and to us, is translated in our Bible as “Receive thy sight.” In the Greek New Testament, it is a single word. It has a wide range of meanings, including: “See again; Look again,” or simply: “Look up.” What the blind man saw was Christ. The vision was transformative; for he followed him, glorifying God. Fr. Mark spoke this last Wednesday night of Lent as a season of spiritual transformation. It is time to look again at Love, and to accept its transforming power. For we are called, as He endured, to endure also. Let us hold the cross before us, as we make yet another Lenten journey, looking on the undimmed reality of Love incarnate, face-to-face, that we may know as we are known, and love as we are loved. + Amen.