

SERMON – QUINQUAGESIMA – 3 MARCH 2019  
St. John’s Anglican Church, Greensboro, North Carolina  
Father Mark Menees, D.D.

Quinquagesima 2019

I Cor. 13: 1-13

Luke 18: 31-43

+In the Name of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Ghost. Amen+

Have there been times in your life when you have encountered or taken on a new situation, challenge, or demand, and then in anxiety thought to yourself, “Whoops, I am in over my head?” A group of young high school athletes from a tiny town headed off to the state capital to play a football game against a school with five times more students and a history of success. They arrived at the stadium and quickly realized it seated more people than were in their entire academic institution. Once on the field for warm-ups, it seemed at least twice the length and breadth of their practice area, and THEN...the opposing team came out to “loosen up”, and they were BIG. Their defensive line alone averaged over 250 pounds per player, and they looked to be in a bad mood. One team mate leaned over to another and said, “What are we doing here? I don’t think I belong on the same field with these guys.” The coach happened to overhear those comments and back in the locker room said, “You may or may not win tonight...you may be ‘out of your league’, but you can play with the skills you have been given and developed. This is a game we all face. Those were prophetic words.

The words of St. Paul from I Corinthians ring out with such music and poetry; with insight and challenge; with so much clarity and truth that when we start to think about them in relation to ourselves it would be easy to say, “I am out of my league”. I cannot even begin to play on the same field with this beauty or with love this giving and patient. After all, I have a difficult time loving myself on a good day, so how am I to live up to this calling? We may not have Paul’s eloquence or insight, but the truth is we are called to be in the same journey with him, and to face the misses and failures in our attempts at charity along with the moments when God’s love has found a place in our hearts and souls and has become the gift we give to one another.

St. Paul is not writing this portrait of love in a vacuum, nor is it addressed “to whom it may concern.” It is poured out to a parish in Greece whose conflict and divisions are well attested. The particulars range from people who believe their own unique gifts of knowledge or insight are the summit of achievement to those who boast they can give themselves up to ransom another and are therefore the moral valedictorians of the community to those for whom the exercise of love is a game of roulette where that love is meted out in varying degrees of care depending on their mood at the moment or the “worthiness” of the recipient. The hard and confrontational word from Paul is that **any and all** of the best efforts and gifts in this life done with the wrong motivations in the end are weightless. In short, they carry no freight. He uses some amusing and unusual images to convey this message. He refers to the cymbal. The word he uses has two things about it that give a clue to what he wants us to hear; the first is he refers to a cymbal made of bronze, (they were not made of bronze or the tone would have been horrible) and second he uses the word in the singular—cymbal. It is the only place in Scripture of which I am aware that this occurs, but more critically get the image in your own mind. How do you play a single cymbal? This is a bit like the Buddhist koan or riddle, “What is the sound of one hand clapping?”. Nevertheless, the point should be clear as a bell (cymbal) and that is life which does not hold at its very core the love God has for us will ultimately be pointless no matter our successes.

We could take many trails down these verses, but today it might be well to see the over-arching tensions and message here as if addressed to our own age. Paul has un-wrapped a package in front of all of us, and in that package are two maps. Each map is for a life journey; one takes us on a travel to things that finally dissipate and cannot last—they have no future; the other takes us to the only thing that finally does have a future because it is comprised of a living relationship with Love Himself. Even Freud, that droll atheist, understood that life is driven toward one of two forces—death or love.

We have, in recent days, come to see, feel, and even from a distance, be touched by the first of these. An officer in the Coast Guard stockpiles weaponry with the intent of striking out at citizens, declaring he

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simply wanted to create death. And in less dramatic but misguided ways our own national conversation has slipped to into fruitless and hollow posturing in which ad hominem arguments replace real dialogue. These are signs of what it means to live in a dying world; that is, in a world where fear, hatred, and pain matched with singular self-interest drive people both against and away from one another. But we need not think that only in these more dramatic contexts is human pride at work. It happens when in frustration or anger we de-humanize others and begin to treat them as objects whose purpose is to serve us rather than as persons with their own struggles and hopes, fears and deep needs. It is present when we give in to resentment or choose to discount others on the basis of their not living up to what we expect. Paul identifies all of these dilemmas by telling us what love is NOT. And the deeper tragedy in all of these examples of human sin is this—THERE IS NO FUTURE IN IT!!!! Paul reminds us all human endeavors not rooted in God will finally pass away. The world cannot be saved by hatred, pride, arrogance, resentment, self-absorption—only by Grace which is God's Love in action. No wonder Jesus' life, ministry, and death on the cross all point to a God who will select nothing other than love to save creation!

So, the second map leads us to a very different field—one where life and hope and trust are sustained due to one thing—LOVE. But understand this—we are not talking about just any old version of love. (A text without a context is simply a pretext for people to make it say whatever they want. St. Thomas Aquinas said, "Love is to will the good of the other!" When I hear I Corinthians 13 read I am reminded of a scene in the movie *Wedding Crashers*. It is a silly comedy starring Owen Wilson and Vince Vaughan, who crash weddings as a hobby in order to meet and pick up new women. They make up elaborate stories about themselves and their escapades in order to get attention and also to get people to ignore the fact they do not have invitations. In one scene the minister says, "And now the bride's sister will read a lesson from Scripture". Wilson points to Vaughan and utters, "a twenty dollar bill says it is I Corinthians." Vaughan replies, "double or nothing it is Colossians 3." The sister comes to the dais and begins, "And now a reading from Paul's first letter to the Corinthians." While this reading is used at many a wedding (and human love is rooted in and is a shadowy image of God's love) its message is about a love beyond what we think possible. We are talking about the love God has for you and me and all, who, due to His heart, are held by divine compassion, and the movie version is the life of Christ. Nothing can buy this for nothing is as precious and nothing can be exchanged for it. It is something that approaches us and it is Good News because it is alive when others things wear out and disappear. (endures all things; never falls). It literally holds the world-yours and mine—together, and without it nothing else lasts.

And, you know, one of the blessings of following the Christian life is that on occasion we get to share what we have received. When someone wrongs us and we forgive, that is love. When despite whatever gift we might have, we use it in a way that is not self-serving or arrogant, that is love. When in having been hurt we find that we do not have to retaliate or harm, we reflect a love far deeper than our own souls can create. When we act in love it is almost as though a little chunk of us is being given away because real love does not seek to gain for ourselves but for the other who is the joy of our life. And we do so for the simplest reason; we are merely giving what we too have received and relish. Some thirty years ago my son, Matthew, who is now 40 started a conversation with a simple statement: "Dad, I know why God made us". Now as you well know what proceeds from the minds, hearts, and the mouths of children often has no precedence or logic to it, and a parent can on many an occasion be grateful that what is uttered is done so in private. On this occasion, however, the punch line was direct and clear—"**He made us because He wanted someone to love**". This my friends is the map; the field in which we have been called to play our lives—Play freely and with joy. Amen.