

We love that passage from 1 Corinthians 13 today, don't we? It would make most people's top ten list of favorite passages. It is used often at weddings. Love is patient, love is kind, love is not envious or boastful...Love never ends. It presents love as such a beautiful ideal. When we read this passage at weddings, it is easy to get sentimental about love. We want to express the love these two people have for each other as they enter into such a deep commitment. We want that love to be blessed by God. It makes their love holy. Our passage recognizes that love is not always easy – it bears all things, endures all things. But surely we are ready to bear all things, and endure all things for the one we love. Of course, this passage tells a lot more about love than for two people who are “in love.” When we use this passage at weddings, it is fine as far as it goes, but there are deeper things being expressed here.

First, Paul is talking about love for each other among the Christian community. Paul is talking about love in the context of spiritual gifts. There is a long list – prophecy, teaching, healing, working miracles, speaking in tongues, leadership. These are all wonderful and necessary for the building up of the community. But without love, they are all meaningless, only superficial measures. Our love is tested and proved when those among the community cannot agree, when some of us are angry, resentful, or irritable, and we still endure all things and do not insist on our own way. Perhaps that is why we read this passage on the day when most churches have their annual meetings.

Even deeper, this passage says something about the way God loves us. In Romans 8, a passage often used at funerals, Paul says that “neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, not powers, not height nor depth, nor anything in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.” God's love is the

bookends to our lives; from beginning to end we live in the light of God's love. It is unconditional, unearned, and we are unable to escape it. And now, we are to love each other the way God loves us.

That is hard enough to do with our spouses, our families, and our friends. But it takes on a whole new level of meaning when we regard it in conjunction with Jesus also telling us that we are to love even our enemies.

Our gospel passage is a continuation of last week's, where Jesus reads a passage from the scroll of Isaiah, and tells the people of Nazareth that the scripture has been fulfilled in their hearing. At first they are amazed at his gracious words. It would have been just fine with them if he had left things right there. But then he goes on to indicate that God's love is not just for them. It reaches beyond their community, it even includes the gentiles. He points out that Elijah was sent to a gentile woman of Zarephath, and Elisha cured Naaman the Syrian, even when there were many lepers in Israel. Horrors! Shouldn't the God of Israel love them first? Shouldn't God love them best?

I lived in Marinette for several years. Some of you know that Marinette is just across the river from Menominee, Mi. In fact the communities are so close, many people shop or work across the river. Because they were in different states, however, the high school football teams did not play in the same conference. So every year they had the big M&M game. It was a game that had no meaning for the standings, but it had become a huge rivalry for city bragging rights. I was amazed at how bitter that rivalry had become. Nasty things were said. Fights would break out in the bars. You had better root for the home team, or your character would be questioned. There were lots of noisy gongs and clanging cymbals, to use Paul's metaphor.

Jesus was not rooting for the home team in Nazareth, and so they took offense. Why is it that we find it so easy to take offense, to make things antagonistic, us against them? Why do we get so angry when those who are different from us, those we hate, are also given the gifts of God's forgiveness and love? We seem to spare little love for suicide bombers, or for child molesters. No one has a good word for Osama bin Laden. Anyone who expressed sympathy for the man would be shouted down and their patriotism questioned. God loves them too, and we do not like it one bit.

That is what is so radically different about Jesus. His love was not limited to family or clan or city. He rejects vengeance. In his reading of the Isaiah scroll he deletes the next line, which the Nazareth folks surely would have noticed. He proclaimed the year of the Lord's favor, but he left out "the day of vengeance of our God." Jesus is saying that God is not a God of vengeance, but a God of favor and love. But we want a god who hates who we hate, so we can justify our own hatred. Such a god would be an idol of our own devising.

As they were about to throw Jesus over the cliff, it says that he passed through the midst of them and went on his way. We want to know "How did he do that?" It sounds like a miracle, or at least a bit of magic. But perhaps the better question is "Why did he do that?" He could have been killed right then and there, and resurrected in three days. I believe his time had not yet come because he had not yet recruited his disciples, his friends. Without his disciples there would have been no one to carry his message to the far places of earth.

The disciples had to learn what the people of Nazareth could not. First they were friends, but then during that awful week before Easter, they too rejected Jesus. They became his enemies, trying to thwart his mission. They too wanted the idol god, the one who would defeat the Roman occupiers, the god who would take vengeance on Israel's enemies. Even to Peter

when he wanted to prevent Jesus from going to Jerusalem, he says, “Get behind me Satan.” But then, after the resurrection, they also experienced his unconditional forgiveness and love. Because we know that God loves and forgives our enemies we know that he will love and forgive us as well, even when we are acting like his enemies.

There was a priest who told me some years ago that he had been preaching this difficult message – that God loves even those we hate. One of his parishioners was a fine upstanding citizen in the community. He was active in civic affairs and served on the town board. We would see him as a righteous man, perhaps even to the point of being a bit rigid. After hearing this sermon, this man came to the church office the next day and stormed into the priest’s office, breathing hard, his face red. “What do you mean preaching that love of our enemies stuff? Do you really believe that God forgives those evil people? Do you think God forgives Hitler? Do you think God loves the child molester?” The priest was a bit taken aback of course, but he said that ‘Yes, God loves even Hitler. God loves even the child molester.’ He expected a big argument in return, but instead the man slumped into a chair and began to cry. You see, he said, “I was involved in some very bad things back when I was in the war. I probably participated in an atrocity. I have not been able to forgive myself, and I have been trying to make up for it ever since. But if God can love and forgive Hitler, then he can love and forgive me. What a huge weight has been lifted.”

Paul says we see in the mirror dimly, but then we will see face to face. Perhaps we can never truly understand God’s love and the gift of forgiveness until we can see that we, who call ourselves God’s friends, have also been God’s enemies. When we are reflected in the mirror of God’s love, then it will become clear, and self-hatred and hatred of others will be dissolved in God’s compassion. Then a weight will be lifted. Then we will be free to be his disciples.

