

PASTORAL PRAYER

Gracious God, source of all goodness, source of love, we come to be accountable to you and our neighbor. We come to grow, to be better citizens of this world and the Kingdom. The way is not easy, God. The pains and burdens of life weigh on us. We struggle with brokenness on our hearts as well as brokenness that manifests itself in the way that others treat us. We mourn for the brokenness of the planet. We are wounded, and we lash out in the same way. Forgive us these sins; forgive us in how we have not acted among our broken brothers and sisters. Hear our prayers. We lift all of the concerns we've named here and on our hearts; empower us for your Kingdom.

Holy God, we most of all come to love, in all the forms that takes. We come to love you, our neighbors, and ourselves in a way that most benefits the name and responsibilities of our Christian name. May we continually think of love as something tangible, love that can be seen and heard. May our love be like your love to us as seen in Jesus. Help us to learn the hard but necessary lesson of your unconditional love. We seek to be fully like Jesus, as difficult as this is for us finite creatures. We pray all these things in the name of the one who taught us what love is, Jesus Christ, who taught us to pray together, saying...

SERMON

We all feel a need, when we have a significant other, especially in a younger relationship, or maybe other family members, to go all out on Valentine's Day. We want to be impressive, we want to be the best and to have the other know how much we care. On Valentine's Day, one of my colleagues posted on Facebook that on year 1 of their marriage, Valentine's Day consisted of going out, sharing gifts, and so forth. On year 15 of their marriage, Valentine's Day consisted of going out to get Diet Pepsi for his wife. What this

reminded me is that maybe the pomp and circumstance isn't the point of love. Maybe love is found in the way that is most meaningful for the receiver and the giver. I didn't try to do this for my wife; I tried to give her gifts that were meaningful to her, and I think she liked them; you'll have to ask her. Love is shown with true thoughtfulness and action, not in trinkets. What matters is that we approach things with love in our hearts and the willingness to go where God takes us. That's why we come here and do what we do.

I've spoken about love in the past, but today, we recognize it as an important and poignant message during this Valentine's season. And what scripture lesson should we choose about love? None other than the ever-popular 1 Corinthians 13. It's probably one of the most important and poetic scripture passages out there. It should have a significant place in any discussion about Christian living. I don't think, though, that its place is best in a wedding or any place around romantic love. We're taking Paul out of his element. The language is very direct because Paul is not talking in abstract, as in what a wonderful thing love is throughout the ages. Paul is getting down to the nitty gritty with a community lost in conflict, rejecting one another over petty squabbles. The love we're talking about here is not romantic love but how we care for one another as Christian community. This is a passage about unconditional love. Let's look at these scripture passages then translate them toward today's theme: the scourge of AIDS, especially among children.

Context, context, context. Day one of any biblical study class, this is the message that they drill into your head. That's what a faithful understanding of the bible requires. Think about jumping into the middle of a conversation. It doesn't necessarily make sense by itself; you need to fill in the blanks. What led up to this part of the conversation? What are the feelings behind the words? Why does this one strong statement make sense? If we

find that in our conversations, we need that in our understanding of scripture. In any part of scripture, we need to define the context. Each book of scripture was written to a specific community with specific concerns. The writers were keen on speaking to specific needs in the communities they wrote, not in generalities. When we read a passage of an Epistle, for instance, we are reading one side of a conversation, and we don't have the other half available, so we have to parse from the letter. As such, love is not being described as an ideal here, says the Texts for Preaching commentary. This is not poetry for the sake of beautiful poetry; this is meant to put love into perspective and into action for a group of people failing in love. The Corinthian Church was embroiled in bitter controversy. It valued some gifts, some graces, but left others out in the cold. It was not a place of grace; it was a place of vicious competition. We read this passage and see how love is the most important thing, but there is a great backstory behind it. Their question was, "What was the most important gift of all?" Most believed it was speaking in tongues; this was the best evidence for whom God favored. Paul knew these things, and he's not a happy guy. His rhetoric, the language and examples he chooses are not just for poetic effect but to teach a valuable lesson. At the beginning of the chapter he goes example by example; if I have this but do not have love, if I have this and do not have love, then all is meaningless. He's taking each and every one of those things the Corinthians value and putting them against love, be they speaking in tongues or prophecies. Without love, nothing has meaning. The basis of Christ's message was love and forgiveness; when what we do as Christian people doesn't reflect this, then what we do as Christian people is for our benefit. And that's not right.

As his message continues, Paul tells us what true love is. As I've explained in the past, love in English is bland. We use it for things that are serious and not serious, for the

feeling between parent and child and between lifelong partners. However, in Greek, we have three different words for love, including agape, philios, and eros. Eros is the romantic love, and philios is brotherly or familial love. Agape is where the rubber meets the road. The other two are generally easy, not always, but generally. Agape is unconditional love. Agape is hard. While the other two involve those who usually love us back, there are no such guarantees with agape. Agape may mean that we love those who will never love us back. It requires us to be at our most mature as Christian people, but as the Apostle Paul said, "When I was a child I spoke like a child, thought like a child, I reasoned like a child; when I became an adult, I put an end to childish ways." When we love without condition, we put an end to childish ways. We stop thinking about "do they deserve it?" or "what will I get in return?" We give it all up for the cause of serving our Lord, which is what love is for.

In this time of love and reflecting upon what it means for us, we should consider everyone. With the three types of love in Greek, we are called to reach everyone: those we know all around, those we consider family, and those we love romantically. Some of us have all of those aspects of our lives; some of us do not. There is a reason that another name for "Valentine's Day" is "Single's Awareness Day," for many of the culturally driven messages shut down those without a significant other. I lived that for many years until I met my wife; I am still aware of that message's damage. Whether we have a partner or not, we are called to be this love in the world. This is not lovey, dovey, high-up ideal. This is love with meat on it; this is love with substance and action. If we are here in these walls, we must think about love with meat, not love as ideal. This love has work clothes and work boots. It is love in action, ready to go and do for the one who taught us what love truly is.

How do we best serve those who are outside the normal love and care of a community like ours? Here in our first scripture lesson is the image of the woman reaching for Jesus' cloak. She suffered from hemorrhages for years without any kind of relief, but she was hopeful to find healing. She reached out for Jesus, seeking to get the tiniest bit of relief from the smallest touch. "If I can just touch the hem of his robe, I will be healed," she thinks. This woman has so much against her, says the New Interpreter's Commentary. She was a sick woman, who was outside the care of the community. Worst of all, she was a woman, and they were second-class citizens in that day. What matters is she reached out for support, and Jesus sensed that she did. She was healed. Jesus' unconditional love was at work; he didn't see her societal position. He didn't ask her why she's in that position or if it was her fault. He didn't see her as a condition or a problem; he saw a beloved person.

AIDS has undergone a long journey in our culture. At first many people interpreted as the wrath of God on earth, but I don't think so. As I was growing up, AIDS was quickly becoming a part of the regular vocabulary. It was becoming better understood and much better able to be countered. At one point, it was a death sentence. I remember the announcement of Magic Johnson being diagnosed with HIV in the early 1990s. That was a very hard thing, but it brought the issue of AIDS more into the cultural mainstream by one of America's favorite celebrities. Any issue becomes different when it has a face, especially a face you have come to care about. The point of that announcement is that AIDS can hit anyone. They may not even have had sexual contact. One can get AIDS through simple contact with blood or a bad transfusion. In my lifetime, I have seen AIDS transform from an unknown, scary disease that carries a death sentence to still one of the scariest diseases out there but one that can be managed with our medical technology. AIDS is one of the most

preventable diseases out there, but we need to have the right tools and the right mentality, and that's what today is for. In many parts of the world, they do not have the advantage that people like Magic Johnson have. They do not have the top-of-the-line in medical technology, but that can be alleviated. This is where we as Body of Christ can step in. This is the place for unconditional love to take hold and for us to be the presence of Christ.

We are not powerful like Jesus; the sick can't touch our robes and can be well again. But we can be compassionate; we can demonstrate Christ's unconditional love to the struggling. Indeed, today we recognize the most vulnerable of the struggling: children. If you have not already given to this cause, I invite you to seriously consider it. In this season of love, we should show love to those whom we care about, but we should also reveal compassionate unconditional love to those whose faces we will never see and whose hands we will never shake. What matters is not who they are or what they've done. What matters is that Christ's compassionate, unconditional love shines in us.

In this time of Valentine's, with its talk of love, we come here to celebrate love in all its forms. We come to be people who love unconditionally, who love as family, and who romantically love as well. As Christians, the first is the hardest; it's our top priority. Let us not fall into the Corinthians' easy trap, who valued some people at the expense of others. AIDS is a horrible part of this world, but I believe it is another opportunity for the Christian church to put on their work clothes and be this unconditional love Paul says is necessary to being Christ's people in this world. So, love well, to those who love you and those who will never love you, moving beyond childish ways to maturity in the spirit of Christ our Lord. Only then can we truly fulfill the nature of Paul's supplications to the Corinthians, which still resound today. Thanks be to God! Amen and Amen.