

Psalm 91:1-2, 9-16
1 Corinthians 13:1-8a

St. John's Presbyterian Church
Devon, Pennsylvania
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LENT AND FALLING IN LOVE

Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude.

It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. *1 Corinthians 13:4-7*

A common view of Lent, both among Catholics and Protestants, is that it is about self-restraint, about giving up things with which we have become too self-absorbed. But it's actually far more than that. Lent is about striving to see more clearly so we can act more like Jesus, act more faithfully and justly in everyday affairs.

Cataracts cloud the vision the way personal priorities and expectations cloud spiritual discernment. Lent challenges us to see and act differently. Take the wise men of Matthew's version of the Christmas story, for instance, who looked for Jesus in a king's palace in Jerusalem—sensible enough, one would think, from the world's perspective, yet all the while he was born in a rented house in Bethlehem. Or consider, in Luke's story, the shepherd's astonishment at being told that they would find the new king in a cattle feeding trough behind a public inn. Or the shock of Easter's finding the Savior of the world impaled on a tree on a bald hill outside the city reserved to execute the worst of criminals—the last place anyone would think to look. Such complete reversals ask us to think and act differently, as do all the gospels. Lent is about learning to think and act differently so that we might live more like Jesus. And if there is one thing that characterizes Jesus, it is the way he loves.

“Love” in our culture is a word whose tread has worn perilously thin. It is often presented as a fairy-tailed cartoon of its Christian sense, a saccharine impostor on millionaire dating shows, or a synonym for wafer thin commitments. Love begins to take on real dimensions in the difference between a hastily remembered greeting card, and a long embrace. In the difference between a civil marriage ceremony where the officiant asks “John, do you love Susan?”, and a sacred ceremony where the question is rather, “John, *will* you love Susan?” Or in the difference between a couple who clink glasses on their anniversary and say, perfunctorily, “To us,” and the couple who say, “To us, in spite of everything,” and keep on pressing on, together.

Which leads us to the Apostle Paul's point. 1 Corinthians 13 is often thought of as the bench mark of human love. And it is. But not as we may imagine. Thoughts on human love are often clouded with human sentiments and romantic notions. And there is a place for those feelings. But the love of which Paul writes is Jesus personified (which we are to emulate), and it is very different from typical human conceptions.

The Greeks, whose ancient language is the writer's palette for all of the New Testament, had not one word for love but four. The first, *storge*, is the love we express within the family. It's the affectionate, caring, even protective love that typically springs naturally between parent and child. Second is *philia*, friendship; the love that emerges between unrelated friends. So, Philadelphia, city of brotherly love, and philodendron, a plant that loves trees or shrubs and clings to them, or philanthropic, one who expresses humanitarian kindness through charitable acts, and so on. The third love is *eros*, which springs from human need. It is the emotional need for affection and intimacy, often it's referenced as sexual love, which it includes, but not solely. Finally there is a quality of love called *agape*, which the Bible, and particularly the New Testament, made its own in a startling way.

Look back at the first three loves, *storge*—familial love, *philia*—friendship, and *eros*—physical affection, and they all share commonalities. They all have to do with *feelings*, affections, and they are all immensely *selective*. Not everyone is our friend. We don't want to bear hug everyone we meet—imagine the chaos on the R-5 or busy downtown Market Street! Agape doesn't replace the other loves—God forbid, we'd no longer be human, but it eclipses them. Agape isn't a bit selective. It has almost nothing to do with feelings and emotions, yet everything to do with volition, with choosing how to be toward others. Listen again to our text, and how this uncommon love says nothing about romantic affections or inducements, but has everything to do with what we *choose to be and do*.

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These are the hallmarks of Christ, and Lent challenges us to live in this way toward others, after the example of Christ Jesus. Lent leads us to take a leap of faith and to act, overcoming self-interest. Why? Because to so change ourselves, and thereby others, is to live in a way that strikes at the heart of all the injustice that bleeds out of contrary actions —impatience, unkindness and meanness. It replaces boasting with modesty, supplants insistence with temperance, irritability and resentment with tolerance and good humor. None of us cherish the negatives, yet when we harbor them we are unkindest to ourselves as well as those we are given to love.

We know who we are and how we can be. We know we need help—God's help. Which reminds me of a prayer I heard of recently. It goes, "I want to thank you, Lord, for being with me this day. With your help, I haven't been impatient or lost my temper; been grumpy, judgmental or envious of anyone. But I will be getting out of bed in a minute, and I think I will really need your help then. Amen."

A few evenings back, I watched again a classic movie, "The Verdict" with the late Paul Newman as a washed up Boston lawyer on his last ditch case, a malpractice suit. The final court scene shows him battling against injustice supported by monumental forces. He rises wearily from behind the plaintiff's desk, and begins to speak slowly, as if absent, to the court in general.

"So much of the time we are just lost. We say, 'Please, God, tell us what is right. Tell us what is true,' when there is no justice. The rich win, the poor are powerless. We become tired of hearing people *lie*. And after a time we become dead. A little death; we think of ourselves as victims. We become weak. We doubt ourselves. We doubt our beliefs. We doubt our institutions. We doubt—the law. [He walks over to the jury.] Well, today *you are* the law; not some book, a marble statue, the trappings of the court. See, those are just symbols of our desire to be just. They are, in fact—a prayer, a fervent and a frightened prayer. In my religion they say, 'Act as if you have faith; faith will be given to you.' If we are to have justice, we need only believe in ourselves, and act with justice. I believe we have justice in our hearts.

Jesus pleads with us from the cross to so choose and *act*.

Faith is a leap. Love is a leap—something we "fall" into. There are no handlebars or handrails for faith and love. It's pure trust. Remember falling in love? It's well named.

This Lent, give your best self away. When we risk throwing our best self into an uncertain outcome an extraordinary thing happens. As we empty ourselves in giving to another we create a void within ourselves that the other is drawn to want to fill; they want to reciprocate in some way, from gratitude. And if not to us, to another. Doing a good thing motivates other good things, like passing a torch to another in a dark place. Acts of unanticipated love and caring also generate confidence.

This past week, after studying 1 Corinthians 13 with the confirmands, I gave them a challenge to do some kindness to another this week, especially to someone outside their usual social group, surprising the other person—and themselves. So I challenge you. Join a work colleague whom you barely know, over lunch, especially someone on the fringe of a popular group. The workplace has those cliques just as school did. Write a note of condolence to someone who would least expect it. Pass on a concert ticket that you can't use to a mere acquaintance. Discover who is hurting, and engage them, not foraging for information but simply to offer comfort and a listening ear. Send a card or letter to a total stranger, perhaps someone in the midst of a crisis whom you learned of through the media.

And here's another thought. Build a bridge to a personal relationship that has foundered. Not necessarily wanting to pick up where you left off, but simply to heal the wound that silence so often makes raw.

Love is not a feeling, it is an action, a choice. Love *is* a verb. Give yourself away and surprise yourself, and in so doing you will become a benediction to another; you will be as Christ to them.

Amen.