

Year C, February 3, 2019  
4 Epiphany  
Christ Church, Mexia

As I indicated last Sunday, there were many divisions in the church at Corinth in the first century and this part of the first letter of Paul to the church that we heard today, I believe, is one of the best known/most often cited parts of the NT. It was designed/written to teach them about love. Paul's description of love contains some of the most beautiful language found anywhere. (read verses 4-8a again)

But wait, you say. Of course, love ends; the divorce rate is near 50 percent, and there is domestic violence – how can it be patient and kind, and so on... But to do so is to have a fundamental misunderstanding of what Paul is writing about.

In the Greek language, there are several words for love. There is *eros* (ἔρως) or "erotic love" and *phileo* (φιλέω) or "brotherly love." Each of these types of love starts or comes from within us. They are basically our needs expressed, and so these types of love fail when they cease to meet OUR needs. That is to be expected.

For example, there is a story "about a young man who was determined to win the affection of a lady who refused to even talk to him anymore. He decided that the way to her heart was through the mail, so he began writing her love letters. He wrote a love letter every day to this woman. Six, seven times a week she got a letter or letters from him. When she didn't respond, he did what most of us do when we are obsessed; he increased his efforts – to about three notes every day. In all, he wrote her more than 700 letters. And she wound up marrying the postman." That's a great example of what obsession and trying to make love fit our will; our needs can do.

But that's not the kind of love Paul was talking about. When writing his letter, Paul used the Greek word *agape* (ἀγάπη). *Agape* is a kind of self-giving love – self-giving in the sense that the focus is on the other – it is the kind of love God has for us. It is unconditional and all of the other adjectives that Paul uses, and it is forever.

If we think of love in this way, it is easy to understand why Paul writes that speaking in tongues, having prophetic powers, understanding all mysteries, having faith enough to move mountains, or giving away

everything is meaningless, if we do not have the love of God. Nothing else can sustain us – and other motivations are not fulfilling.

God offers us love, true love – God gave his only begotten Son as proof of that love, but we may not realize what that means or truly and deeply feel that love. But it's the key. We have to know and to understand God's love for us. We must infuse our lives with that love, for only when we do that will we be able to see other people as God sees them - sees us. It is only then that we can begin to love as God loves us. Like the moon reflects the light of the sun, we are to reflect God's love.

And Patrick Morley says, "The height of our love for God will never exceed the depth of our love for one another." We cannot love God and hate each other. We must fulfill both commandments – they are related. But one caveat – God's love IS being more concerned with the other than with your own self, but this does not mean that you have to or should remain in an abusive situation; it is not about becoming co-dependent with someone. Don't stop loving them, but rather love them enough to get them the help they need in these situations. Or help them to find God's love, which they obviously have not found.

Now it is true - love is a precarious act in this world; it is not always returned. But ask God to give you this gift of loving unconditionally. Try to see others the way God sees them, no matter how difficult they may be. If you can, that love will never fail. And remember that God is always with you like he promised to be and was with Jeremiah. God's got your back!

In closing, let me remind you of a story by Margaret Rose Powers: "One night I had a dream. I was walking along the beach with the Lord, and across the skies flashed scenes from my life. In each scene, I noticed two sets of footprints in the sand. One was mine, and one was the Lord's. When the last scene of my life appeared before me, I looked back at the footprints in the sand, and to my surprise, I noticed that many times along the path of my life there was only one set of footprints. And I noticed that it was at the lowest and saddest times in my life. I asked the Lord about it, "Lord, You said that once I decided to follow You, You would walk with me all the way. But I notice that during the most troublesome times in my life, there is only one set of footprints. I do not understand why You left my side when I needed You most." And the Lord replied, "My precious child, I never left you

during your time of trial. Where you see only one set of footprints, I was carrying you.”

Whoever you are – whatever you may do, God loves you. God is with you more than you know. Feel it! Revel in it! Share it!

In the name of the one God, the Creator, the Word, and the Spirit.

Amen.