

Trinity Church Wall Street 11:15am Holy Eucharist – Trinity Sunday
The Rev. Philip A. Jackson Transcript

“Love is Patient; Love is Kind”

Over his 28 years performing marriage rites, Father Phil thinks that 98% of couples chose today’s reading from Corinthians to be read at their weddings. Reflecting on this famous “lesson about love” he reminds us today that Corinthians 13: 1–13 is actually not about romantic love at all. “It serves in some way to remind us of the imprecision with which we talk about love.”

He offers that Paul is talking about a type of love that is reflected in a community such as ours, a type of love that is about elevating the needs of others, a type of love “that is a reflection of God’s love for all of humanity and, indeed, all of creation.” The readings are Jeremiah 1: 4–10, Psalm 71: 1–6, 1 Corinthians 13: 1–13, and Luke 4: 21–30.

Sermon Transcript:

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen. Please be seated, everyone.

Good morning. I think it goes without saying that there is a special place in heaven reserved for those who come out to church on a day like today when it is 14 degrees outside, bitterly cold. You all, thank you. Thank you for coming out. It's good to see you and stay warm. I want to say a little something today about the first letter of Paul to the Corinthians, the lesson that we have, which is quite famous. Matter of fact, that lesson about love that we heard just a few minutes ago from 1st Corinthians 13 is one of the authorized readings for the marriage ceremony. And I would probably guess that over the course of my 28 years now as a priest in the Episcopal Church, probably done over a 100 weddings, I would say somewhere in the order of 98% of the couples choose this lesson as one of their readings. And it is not inappropriate that they choose this lesson on love. Although to be quite frank, this is not at all about romantic love. Matter of fact, not at all. When we talk about love, it serves in some way to remind us of the imprecision with which we talk about love today. We unfortunately in the English language, don't have very many words to describe love. We use love in a broad variety of ways. We say, I love the Knicks. Well, you don't really say that, but you might think that you wouldn't say that out loud to somebody. But you say, I love it. Or I love blueberry pie. We just thought out there, I love I love. When really what we mean is I like them, I like them but we say love. But Paul is not talking about like and he's not talking about romantic love in today's lesson.

Paul is talking about a type of love, the type of love which is ideally reflected in a community such as ours. Among Christians, such as ourselves, and among the peoples, and between peoples that has nothing to do with romance or like, but it is a way of looking at others that puts others needs first above our own self-interest. Puts others over and above our own self-interest. That's the type of love he's talking about. It

of course, is the type of love that is a reflection of God's love for all of humanity, and in fact, indeed all of creation. That's the love that Paul is talking about. So three points. Number 1, Paul is not writing about romantic love. He's talking about love in this other deeper, richer sense. A type of love that is a reflection of God's love for all of creation that puts the needs of others, of the other over and above one's own self-interest. Of course, God's greatest reflection or manifestation I should say, of that was that He gave his only son that all of creation might be saved. He put all of creation above His love for His Son, Jesus Christ, so that we might all be saved, that's the highest demonstration, an act of love that we know of. In fact, we are here today on this cold morning, we are here today because hopefully, we reflect upon and have some glimpse, have some small glimpse of that love that God had for all of creation by giving His son even to death on the cross. So we're not talking here about romantic love. We're talking about something that is grander. We're talking about something that is more profound and something that is more mysterious, and something that we can only glimmer a slight bit of now as through a mirror dimly. But we will know it in its fullness. We will know it, Paul says, in the same way that God knows us: face to face.

It's ironic in a time in which I look out and everyone's wearing a mask. It's hard to see you face-to-face, but that is how God sees us face-to-face. We are known. Paul says face-to-face. That's how God knows us and sees us. By that he is saying, God knows each and every one of us in a way that perhaps we don't even know ourselves. He knows us face-to-face. Point 2, Paul is saying in this lesson that one can have everything. One can be anything, one can do everything. But if you don't have what? Love. Love. It is all useless, needless, nothing. We can have everything. You can have possessions. You can be the best. You can do anything you want, Paul says. And in our culture today, having it all is highly valued, isn't it? Having things, being anything you want, doing anything you wish? We put a high value on that. But Paul quite clearly says today, you can be, do, have everything, anything you want, you desire, but if you don't have love, it's worthless. It means nothing. It's worthless. Talk about a countercultural message for us. It's interesting because it was countercultural even for his culture back then, 2,000 years ago. We've frequently as human beings, conflated happiness with having, being, doing. Paul says, in God's world, all of that is nothing if there's no love with it. There's nothing. I used to have a friend that cared about the poor. He cared about the poor, wanted to ameliorate conditions. Yet he was really problematic when it came to individuals. And I'd just say to him, you love people, but you hate individuals, don't you? He said, yeah. You bet. Love is not an abstract. Love is a concrete. Love is a thing.

You can say you love the abstract. But if you don't have love for the people in front of you, it is worth nothing. That's what Paul is saying. Finally, there's this mysterious passage at the end in which Paul declares that love never ends. For we know only in part and we prophesy only in part, but when the complete comes, that is, when God comes amongst us, when God comes and time is fulfilled. When the complete comes, the partial will come to an end. And we now see as in a mirror dimly. But then when he comes, we will see face-to-face. This is a profound and deeply mysterious thing, he says. The way we see now is an incomplete thing. The way we look at one another, the way we look at ourselves, the way we look at the world, we see this and we declare it real. But Paul says, we're actually seen but dimly. This great moment, you all know that I'm a big Thomas Merton fan. And there's this great moment when Merton is in Louisville in 1958. And he's at the corner of Fourth and Walnut rush hour and he's standing on the corner and he describes it as all of a sudden, he says, I saw every person around me as a point of

light. And I could see them as beautiful creatures of God. He says, if only they could see each other the same way. If only we could see each other for what we really are. We are beautiful things of light, beautiful things of God. And if only we could see that, not as we see where we get angry and mad and we see people as this and I don't like that. And I don't want this person, I don't like that person. If we could see one another for who we really are, and the light that is in each one of us. He says, war would cease, poverty would cease, anger would cease. All those things that mire us would cease if we could see, not dimly, but face-to-face. And Paul promises us that one day we shall, one day we shall. We will see one another for who we really are, and that will be the kingdom.

Amen.