

Commentary on the Gospel for Wed, Sep 17th 2014

“Love never fails.” Saint Paul is adamant about this. Love is the lodestar of his message to the Corinthians – and to us – this day. We strive for the greatest of spiritual gifts, but Love is “a still more excellent way.” All else fails – tongues, prophecies, knowledge, even faith – all these will fail, but yet Love remains.

This seems quaint, clichéd perhaps. A sort of Hallmark sentimentality for a Wal-Mart world. The middle of this passage is oft-repeated. And this repetition can dull the impact. It can become the background noise to a wedding, the skipped cover on a Valentine’s day card, or the treacly lyric in an over-tuned song.

This is not, though, what Saint Paul has in mind here. Look back over what he says about Love -- not just the part about being patient and kind, but the whole approach. Love is what makes speech not just a clashing cymbal. It is what gives meaning to prophecy and to works of charity and self-sacrifice. Our faith may be enough to move mountains but, without Love, it is nothing. Love is what takes us from the present things to the greater things; Love is what shall bring us to full and perfect knowledge. Not faith. Not good works. Love. How radical that sounded then! And how radical it is even today!

We can recall that Jesus gives us a simple definition of Love elsewhere in the Gospel: “No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends.” Love is the surrender of all we hold dear and all we have, the surrender of our very selves. As Paul says, it never fails; rather, it builds up and brings all things to fulfillment, to perfection.

What then, are we to do? The invitation for us is to critically examine what we do in our lives and why we do those things. And to ask if we do them as loving responses. Saint Ignatius of Loyola, as part of the Contemplation on Attaining Divine Love, one of his Spiritual Exercises, invites us to ask how we respond in Love to God’s Love for us. For him, the response is the prayer of self-offering, his *Suscipe* – Take Lord, and receive all my life, my memory, my understanding, and my entire will. All is offered in response. Can I make a similar response in love?

And, whatever my response, does it come out of a place of Love? Do I offer good works out of Love for those I serve? That is, do I stand with them as brother and sister? Or, am I doing it out of some sense of obligation, to win an award, or just habit? Do I insist upon an orthodoxy in faith and belief out of Love for God, or out of a desire to be correct?

None of the things Saint Paul compares to Love are bad things. And life would be far worse off if we lost any of them. Yet, in the absence of Love, they can and do grow twisted and gnarled. All words become clashing cymbals without the Word of Love to guide them. And so we are invited to a deeper sense of Love in our lives. To be guided by it. For Love never fails.

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