

Saint Paul is building up to what is known as his “Hymn to Charity.” This teaching began last Sunday when he listed a number of gifts of the Holy Spirit and reminded us that although they are different gifts given to different people, they are all from the same Lord. This week he compares the use of these different gifts to how the different parts of a body function for the good of the whole person. We are all parts of the body of Christ, but we don’t all have the same role to play within that body. To quote Paul: “Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Are all teachers? Do all work mighty deeds? Do all have gifts of healing? Do all speak in tongues? Do all interpret?” The answer to all of those questions is “no.” Does Paul list all of the gifts? Again, no. Enumerating the ways all of us can serve the entire body of Christ is impossible. But each one of those gifts is vital to the healthy functioning of the Body of Christ. No one is insignificant and there can be no bystanders.

Today’s reading ended with those questions but in the Bible it concludes with an exhortation for us to strive eagerly for the greatest spiritual gifts and a promise that Paul would show us a still more excellent way. Paul then leads us into the Hymn to Charity and an exposition of the theological virtues of faith, hope, and love. This section begins with reference to the various gifts minus one key ingredient: “If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal.” If I have prophetic powers and all knowledge and all faith and if I endure martyrdom, but do not have love, I gain nothing; I am nothing.

First we have to understand the historical context. The Corinthians prized certain gifts such as speaking in tongues because they were ways of drawing attention to themselves. When those gifts were used to build up the egos of the individuals who had them, they created division within the community and those people were just making a lot of empty noise which did absolutely no good. Those gifts—including faith and martyrdom—were useless and amounted to nothing unless they were directed to God and to the good of the community.

Paul tells us that love is an essential part of the use of the gifts God has given us but now we have to understand what he meant by love. Love—or charity—is a supernatural gift which is given to us by God. It cannot be reduced to an emotion or feeling that comes and goes over time. This makes sense because we cannot really control our feelings and emotions. What can we control (more or less)? Our actions. Paul defines love by saying it is patient and kind, only in Greek those two words are used as verbs; they are action words. The love to which Paul refers to in this section is not defined by feelings but by actions.

When asked or commanded to do something good that we don't want to do, but do it anyway, it is a sign of love, regardless of how we feel. If that sounds fishy to you, think about this. Jesus told us in John's gospel: "If you love me, you will keep my commandments." Keeping the commandments requires obedience. It sometimes means we have to act contrary to our own wills in favor of God's will. Jesus himself gives us an example of that in the Garden of Gethsemane: "Father, let this cup—meaning his crucifixion—pass from me, but not my will but your will be done." Jesus proved his love for his Father—and us—through his obedience. Did he enjoy what came after Gethsemane? No—it was literal torture for him, the worst suffering imaginable. But he endured it for the greater purpose of setting us free.

Paul is speaking of active, sacrificial love. If we do something good for the good of someone else even though we don't want to, that is a sign of love. However, if we feel resentment over those actions and hold onto a grudge over the action, or boast about it, that might indicate a lack of love, because those are characteristics that Paul says love is not. So watch out for that. Another thing to be aware of in this is that just because love is supposed to be sacrificial and selfless, that does not give the recipient of that love license to treat other people as open-all-night vending machines. We need to be considerate and realistic in our requests and expectations of others because they have needs and limitations of their own. Treating another person as an object, a dispensing machine, a rung on the ladder for us to step on takes away that person's humanity.

Love is actively patient, love is actively kind. What does that look like on a practical level? You might have five hundred things to do but you take the time to patiently listen to someone else's problems. That is active patience. Someone hurt you, but instead of striking back at him or her, you pray for them that they will experience the greatest of God's blessings. That is active kindness.

The final thing is that Paul isn't speaking in an idealistic, generalized way. St John wrote "If anyone says 'I love God,' but hates his brother, he is a liar; for whoever does not love a brother whom he has seen cannot love God whom he has not seen." Our love of God is expressed by how we love our neighbor. That neighbor isn't some ideal person out there somewhere, it is the concrete living and breathing person you are sitting next to, passing on the street, or living next door to—whether you like that person or not. How we treat that person shows our love for God.