

## A Still More Excellent Way

### Fourth Sunday after Epiphany, Year C – 1 Corinthians (12:31b) 13:1-3

*preached by the Rector at St. Paul's, Henderson, January 31, 2016*

Lord, take my eyes and see through them. Take my lips and speak through them. Take my soul and set it on fire with love for thee. Amen.

Though you sometimes see some partial representation here in this country, especially in the south, the Passion Play, a full dramatic representation of the Christ's Passion from the Last Supper through the crucifixion and resurrection, have been all the rage in central Europe for centuries. In modern times, these annual Passion Plays are big, big business in places like Oberammergau, Germany, involving years of planning, meticulous sets and make-up, highly competitive casting, and drawing crowds of tourists from all over the world, all bringing big, big money into the local economy.

The story is told of one such event no so long ago, though I never heard where. Though much of the cast was from the usual families of locals, the director in this case had carefully chosen a famous actor to play the lead part, of Jesus. Everyone was agreed that this choice had the potential to lift *their* Passion Play into real prominence, and as rehearsals progressed, everyone was pleased, and even *moved*, by the great actor's portrayal.

Then came the big day, the opening performance, and everything seemed to be going like clockwork in front of the largest audience that that town had experienced in the nearly 400-year history of staging the production. But three hours into the Play, as the drama was building to its climax, as Jesus, beaten and bleeding, carried his cross up the long, dusty road to Mt. Calvary, one of the spectators, perhaps three hours into his excess of drinking, began to heckle the great actor playing the lead. "What's a matter, buddy," he yelled, but in German or Italian or whatever, "did ya spill the ketchup?" The actor noticeably broke part to glare in the man's direction, which, of course, only spurred him on. "Hey, that looks kinda heavy there, guy, you sure you can handle all that styrofoam?" On and on it went, through the second fall and the wiping of Veronica's veil, until the procession was right in front of the man who had kept up his loud, steady stream of insults, in spite of the crowd's efforts to quiet him. "What do ya think there, *Karl*, ya gonna make it to the Resurrection?"

Now within just a few feet of his heckler, the great actor had finally had enough, dropped his cross, jumped into the crowd, and punched the man in the mouth, before resuming his dramatic trek up the hill.

When the Play was over, the director took him aside and said, "I hate to do it, but I've got to let you go. I know the guy deserved it, but we can't have *Jesus* acting like that." The actor begged for another chance, assuring his friend that if it happened again, he could, he *would* handle it more appropriately, and the director relented.

The next day, as they came to the same spot in the action, and the same place along the route, sure enough, there was the same spectator in the same seat, and sure enough he was just as well lubricated, and sure enough he was slinging the same set of insults, with a few more thrown in for good measure. But this time, the actor seemed to ignore the loud-mouthed bully. The crowd, many of whom had been present the day before, and the rest of whom had *heard* about the day before, the crowd held their collective breath as the procession reached the critical juncture. But this time, as the actor drew close to his nemesis, he broke character only long enough to whisper, "I'll see *you after* the resurrection!"

In our reading last week from his first letter to the church he founded in Corinth, Paul talked about the Body of Christ and the need each of us has, as members of that Body, to be part of the whole. Paul ends chapter 12 with a list of gifts, of ministries with which the Holy Spirit has equipped the Church for the life of the Body of Christ. "But strive," he concluded, "for the better gift." And this week, we pick

up again with one of the most remembered, many would say best beloved passages of Scripture, 1 Corinthians 13, often called simply, “The Love Chapter.”

The problem is that there’s one more sentence between where we left off last Sunday, and where we pick up with the Love Chapter this week. Now, it’s unlikely that the chapter and verse divisions as we have them have any basis in how Paul originally wrote his letter, but they’re the divisions that we have, so we’re stuck with them. But every now and then, there’s a little glitch. Every now and then, one little bit or another gets put in one place, when maybe it should be in another. Every now and then, something falls between the cracks. And this week I got to thinking that this is one of those times, because there’s that one sentence between where we left off last Sunday, and where we pick up this week.

Concluding his list, Paul says, “But strive for the greater gifts.” “And I will show you,” he continues, “a still more excellent way.” “Here are the gifts,” Paul says, to folks that weren’t sure everyone else’s gifts were gifts at all, “gifts that have all been given by the Holy Spirit to the Body of Christ.” “Every one of them,” Paul says, to folks that were apparently fussing over which gifts was better than the others, “*every* gift is needed for the Church to be whole.” “Strive,” Paul says, to folks who have grown all too content with settling for something less than what the Spirit has for them, “strive for the better gift.” “*And,*” Paul continues, to folks that he really, really wants to know about the fullness of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, “*and* I will show you a still more excellent way.”

On the Day of Pentecost, when the Holy Spirit filled the Apostles with power, the very first proclamation of the Gospel was preached in the languages of *all* the people that needed to hear it, in tongues unknown to the men and women that spoke them. From that moment, many of those filled by the Spirit of God have also been given that gift, and that was certainly the case in the church of Corinth, where some thought that that gift in itself was *all* they needed. But Paul wanted to make sure they knew otherwise. “If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels,” he says, “if I speak in every language known to man, and even if I speak in the language of heaven,” he says, “and I don’t have love,” he says, “I might as well be making an unnecessary and ineffectual racket.”

From the beginning of the Good News, nearly every hearer, nearly every *teller* of the Good News had a different understanding of the message of Jesus Christ, a different way to know and tell about the glory of his Resurrection. There was Peter’s way, and there was James’ way, and there was John’s way, and of course, there was Paul’s way. And there were those in the church in Corinth that thought they had the whole thing figured out. “But even *if* I have prophetic powers,” Paul says, “and *if* I understand all mysteries,” he says, “and *if* I have *all* knowledge,” he says, “but I don’t have love, all that *if* means absolutely nothing.”

Jesus told his followers that if they just had the faith of a mustard seed, a mustard seed, they could move mountains, and the people of Corinth were convinced that they had a whole mustard *tree* of faith. Our salvation, Paul said again and again as he wrote to the congregations for whom he was beloved pastor, is through faith that Christ has already done everything that needs to be done. The Corinthians had faith, they were certain that through the power of Christ’s Resurrection, eternal life was theirs as well. And yet Paul offers a “still more excellent way.” “If I *had* the faith to move mountains,” he says, “but do not have love,” he says, “I am nothing.”

In a world where most survived just on the margins, perhaps some among the Corinthians were among those that Paul commended elsewhere for their generosity. “But even if I give up *everything*,” Paul says, “if I put my whole *world* behind me,” he says, “even if I give up my freedom, my individual self, my very *existence*,” he says, “and I don’t have *love*,” he says, “then I’ve pretty much wasted it *all*.”

You see, it’s not enough to speak all the right words, not enough to speak gently, or forcefully, or rationally, or emotionally, not enough at work, or at home, or at *church*, not enough to pray your prayers from the very rooftops, in the purest language of the Spirit.

It’s not enough to know the right facts and figures, not enough to be on the right side of debates, or legislation, or councils, or primates meetings, not enough to assume we have it all figured out.

It’s not enough to be perfectly grounded in faith, not enough to be able to quote the proceeding of the Council of Nicaea, or the Lambeth Quadrilateral, or the Catechism.

It's not enough to give to *all* the right causes, not enough to give of time, or talent, or treasure of whatever source, not enough to give a little, or to give absolutely *everything*.

It's not even enough to look *just like Jesus*, bruised and bleeding, and dragging a cross up the side of Mt. Calvary.

If you don't have love, if you aren't speaking, and seeking, and sharing, and giving in genuine love – for the one who loves you, and for the one *right in front of you* – then you are missing out on that more excellent way.

Love is what set the entire cosmos of time and space into *existence*. Love is what created such beings as you and me, *capable* of returning the love of God, and *capable* of loving one another. Love is what caused God to be involved in the flow of language and knowledge and faith and giving. Love is what came down from heaven to become one of us, to *show* us that more excellent way. Love preached peace and faith and hope. Love carried that cross up that hill, and love was nailed to that cross, for you, and for me. And dear friends, it was *love* that burst out of that sealed tomb, to ensure for whatever's left of time, and for when time is *no more*, that what we have is so much more than a noisy gong, or a clanging cymbal.

“Strive for the better gifts,” Paul said. “And I will show you a still more excellent way.”