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Immanuel Lutheran Church – Burns, WY
Advent III – Midweek (dual parish service with St. John’s, Kimball, NE)
December 14, 2016 Biblical Virtue: Love
Text: I John 4:7–5:5; I Corinthians 12:31–13:13

Grace be to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

“So now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; but the greatest of these is love” (I Corinthians 13:13).

Tonight, we come to the crown jewel of the three theological virtues: love. The apostle Paul declared that faith, hope and love abide. These three endure; they stand the tests of time, prosperity and adversity. Faith is the absolute assurance of things promised but not seen or experienced with our physical senses. Faith is the conviction that things unseen are true nonetheless because God Himself is the guarantee of what is believed. Hope is the expectation of an unseen good, established by divine promise, that will be fulfilled in the future. Faith and hope are glorious, precious gifts of God. But the greatest of all is love.

The challenge that lays before us tonight is to understand love described for us in Scripture as opposed to the many, many inadequate notions of love heard and read every day in our world. There is a distinction that needs to be made tonight about love. There are two kinds of love: natural love and supernatural love.

Natural love is a gift of God; God is love after all. This kind of love is seen in mothers and fathers loving their children; in husbands and wives loving each other; in siblings loving each other; in friends loving each other. This kind of natural love is available to all people whether or not they are believers or unbelievers. Natural love is beautiful and powerful. It should be cherished and nurtured at all levels of society. But this is not the kind of love we are considering tonight.

The love described for us in tonight’s Scripture readings is a supernatural, divine love that can only be found, first of all in God Himself, and secondarily, in God’s people who have saving faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. From the very beginning of these midweek Advent services, I stated the three theological virtues are those gifts of God that only Christians can possess. Only Christians who are born again by baptismal waters and God’s Holy Spirit can know and share God’s divine love.

To begin with, this supernatural love is defined and described most comprehensively in I Corinthians 13; actually, it begins in 12:31, “But earnestly desire the higher gifts. And I will show you a still more excellent way.” The highest gift and the most excellent way is love, which Paul describes for the rest of ch. 13.

He begins by describing great acts of human accomplishment aided by God’s grace! If a person is able to speak in the tongues of men and angels...if a person has such amazing mental capacity so as to understand all prophetic mysteries and knowledge...if a person is so gifted with the kind of faith that can move mountains...if a person is even willing to give his life away in martyrdom... Those are marvelous qualities. But the surprise is that Paul says that if love, divine love, is missing in any of them, they are worthless and nothing. Nothing! Without love.

The next verse gives a positive statement of what love is: love is patient and kind. Now we begin to get closer to seeing what this greatest of virtues might actually be. Love is patient and kind. With whom is love patient? To whom is love kind? Our family? Friends? Those we like and those who like us? Jesus helps us answer these questions in the Sermon on the Mount (5:43–48):

⁴³“You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ ⁴⁴But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, ⁴⁵so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven. For he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust. ⁴⁶For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? ⁴⁷And if you greet only your brothers, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? ⁴⁸You therefore must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.

Divine love extends its excellencies to those who don’t like us and to those we may not like either, even our enemies and persecutors. To be perfect as our Father is perfect is to love as He loves. Our Father gives His gifts to those who are evil, that is, those who hate Him and His ways. And yet, He loves them by giving what they need.

And so now we come to a better understanding of what love is: a complete and absolute giving of oneself with patience and kindness to the other person purely for the sake of that other person. One theologian defined love’s essence as “the movement out of narcissism. The true foe of love is not hate but egocentrism, for ... egocentrism prevents us from ever moving out of ourselves toward the other” (Louis Markos, p. 134). Love is not found in our emotions or our whims but in a decided, Holy Spirit

inspired devotion and active concern for the person whom the Lord places in your life at any given moment of time.

This divine love concerned for the good of others is that which “created the universe and sent Christ down to suffer Hell on the cross to save us rebels, the love that kissed the traitor Judas, suffered the soldiers’ slaps and sneers, and prayed (in response), ‘Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do’” (Peter Kreeft, p. 76). “If you want to know what love is, look at Christ dying for us on the cross. That is the best definition of love in the world. Saint Bernard of Clairvaux said that whenever he looked at a crucifix, he saw Christ’s five wounds as lips speaking to him the words, ‘I love you.’” (Peter Kreeft, p. 78). I am convinced that Bernard, a 12th century mystic and abbot, was reflecting upon Romans 5:8 and I John 4:9 when he said those words, “but God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us” (Rom. 5) and “In this the love of God was manifest among us, that God sent his only Son into the world, so that we might live through him” (I John 4). We know God’s divine, perfect love most fully and completely in the death of Jesus on Calvary’s cross. That, in part, is why we use crucifixes in our churches. They are visual reminders of God’s perfect, divine love. In that love, we have eternal life.

When you consider that God’s love is seen in Jesus, especially in His crucifixion, the rest of I Corinthians makes more sense. St. Paul said that love does not envy or boast; it isn’t rude, arrogant or self-insistent; it isn’t irritable or resentful. Instead, love (as seen in Jesus) rejoices in the truth. Love bears, believes, hopes, and endures all things. Love never ends. It even outlasts faith and hope. Or rather, maybe it is better to say that love fulfills and completes faith and hope.

Divine, supernatural love is found in God for God is love, says the apostle John (2x, I John 4:8, 16). “And whoever loves has been born of God and knows God (I Jn. 4:8). Now that we know and have received this love, we Christian believers are called to share that love with one another. “Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God abides in us and his love is perfected in us” (I John 4:11–12). “We love because he first loved us” (I John 4:19).

This is why we pray so fervently to God for true love to remain among us. The Small Catechism’s explanation to the 6th Petition, “And lead us not into temptation” teaches us that we are constantly asking God “to guard and keep us so that the devil, the world, and our sinful nature many not deceive us and mislead us into false belief,

despair, and other great shame and vice.” Great shame and vice are sins against love, love for God and love for our neighbor. The Holy Spirit defends us from loveless shame and vice.

You, dear saints of God, are called to a life of good works offered in service to God and neighbor. Those good works flow out of the virtues of faith, hope, and love. These three abide. But the greatest is love. God’s love defines our lives now and for all eternity. “Everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ has been born of God, and everyone who loves the Father loves whoever has been born of him...For this is the love of God, that we keep his commandments. And his commandments are not burdensome. For everyone who has been born of God overcomes the world. And this is the victory that has overcome the world—our faith” (I John 5:1, 3–4).

It is God who remembered us in our low estate, and rescued us from our foes, and who gives food to all flesh, for his steadfast love endures forever (Psalm 136:23–25).

The Lord continue to strengthen and enrich your supernatural virtues of faith, hope, and especially love ...

✠ In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. ✠ Amen.

Now the peace of God which surpasses all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus unto life everlasting. Amen.