

The Greatest of These

Among the Bibles I have in my office is one that I bought when I was fifteen years old. It's a leather-bound, gold-edged Oxford Annotated Bible with the Apocrypha in the Revised Standard Version. I was proud to pay for it myself even though it was expensive. I used it a lot over the years, always putting it back in its original box so it would stay in good shape. Even now I sometimes prefer its language to the more modern *New Revised Standard Version* that we hear read in church.

I'm not one to mark up a Bible, so it's significant that I underlined (in pencil, of course) several of the verses that we heard read this morning from the thirteenth chapter of Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians. They're the verses that describe the nature of love – patient, kind, not envious or boastful or rude. Remarkably, I even remember why I underlined them. As a teenage boy I had discovered girls, and I wanted to remember what the Bible told me about how to conduct myself when I was in love. I already knew that I wasn't making a very good go of it, and thought that underlining Bible verses would help.

As years went by and I rediscovered those underlined verses, I would be embarrassed at how naïve I was. I shouldn't have been. In another part of that Bible I could read the call of Jeremiah that we also heard this morning. Jeremiah was probably overstating the case when he called himself a boy, yet there's no doubt that he felt the limitations of his youthfulness. He received assurance that God would be with him, especially in adversity. God is always with us, of course, whether we're aware of it or not. Now that I am much older I have a larger perspective of how God acts in my life. I also have a much better understanding of what Paul was talking about when he wrote to the church in Corinth.

Romance is only one meaning of love. People of an age to be caught up in romantic love delight in Paul's words, which is why we hear this passage read so often at weddings. I embraced that meaning at age fifteen. Yet the Greek language has several words for love and Paul deliberately chose *not* to use the one associated with passionate love, the word "eros." Instead he chose the word "agape" [uh-GAH-pay]. It was little used outside the New Testament. Indeed, we would not know much about agape love without the writings of Paul and St. John the Evangelist. It took me quite a while to figure that out.

Over time I found that other verses in the thirteenth chapter spoke more strongly to me. As my cherished Bible translates them, "Now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall understand fully, even as I have been fully understood." I discovered that as I learned more I knew less, because I could see how much more there was to learn. I was able to experience love and give names and attributes to God, yet I saw that they are all a dim reflection of God's reality. Only in God's actual presence will we be able to fully understand. What still takes my breath away is that then we will recognize that all along we have been fully understood, fully known, by God. Who has ever felt fully understood, even by those who love us deeply? How can we be, since we do not even fully understand ourselves?

This is so much richer than just thinking of love as being patient and kind. God's love is total, self-emptying love, love that puts the welfare of others above the love of self. Thinking that way is strange and difficult for us because it is the exact opposite of what we experience in our individualistic culture. So often we hear strident claims for personal freedom. So little we hear about putting others first before self. That fact that someone might say I'm now being political says a lot about the state of our society. If it's political, then Jesus Christ was political. The ultimate symbol of putting others ahead of self is the Cross of Christ. When Jesus told us to pick up our cross and follow him, he meant that to be a Christian is to consider the welfare of others first.

This is a much greater understanding of love than a fifteen-year-old's underlining his Bible. I'm no longer embarrassed for being who I was, any more than I'm embarrassed for who I am now. I was and still am a sinner redeemed by God. I fall down and Jesus picks me up. I still see in a mirror dimly and I know only in part. Yet I firmly believe and truly hope that there will be a time when I and you and everyone will see God face to face. Then we will be fully known and know that we are fully loved. That's why the greatest of all, greater than our faith and our hope, is the love of God given to us through Jesus Christ. Thanks be to God.

[Epiphany 4: Jeremiah 1:4-10; Psalm 71:1-6; 1 Corinthians 13:1-13; Luke 4:21-30.]