

## Empathy

Exodus 3: 1-15 & 1 Corinthians 13 (12:1-14:1)<sup>1</sup>

*15<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time/ 16<sup>th</sup> July 2006*

Last weekend I was in New Jersey to officiate at my cousin's wedding. It was a beautiful, outdoor service overlooking the fairways of a golf club. My cousin, Loren, and her now-husband, Matthew, selected 1 Corinthians 13 for the service, along with Colossians 3: 12-17. Both texts are often used at weddings, especially 1 Corinthians 13, sometimes known as the "Love Chapter." We could also call it the "Wedding Chapter" because it seems like that's about the only time we read it. It's particularly popular among couples who have no real connection to a faith community, but can read Paul's lyrical verses and say, "Sure, that sounds good. This is a good statement on the gift of love." These words are so well known, found printed on all kinds of inspirational cards and plaques, sometimes never quoting Paul. Years ago, a minister friend back in New Jersey once said to me that after a wedding in his church where this same chapter was read, a woman came up to thank him for the beautiful service and to say she really liked his reading and said, "Wow, that was great. Did you write it yourself?" Amazing.

It is a marvelous chapter. Well known. But I have to confess that I'm usually a little uneasy when it's read at a wedding. Paul didn't write it for a wedding. Paul never wrote it to stand alone. The original manuscripts of the Bible didn't contain chapters and verse, they were added much later.<sup>2</sup> Sometimes the chapter demarcations actually hinder us from understanding the full scope of a text. Our chapter thirteen is actually the culmination of a sophisticated argument Paul is making for the Christian life. It needs to be read within the context of chapter twelve and even on into fourteen. To read it alone is, in some ways, taking it out of context. And out of context it's difficult to see what Paul is getting at here. Let me try to explain.

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<sup>1</sup> It would be helpful when reading this sermon to read the scripture lesson first.

<sup>2</sup> "The first person to divide the Bible into chapters in a systematic way was Cardinal Hugo de Sancto Caro from 1244 to 1248 A.D. The chapter divisions that are commonly used today were developed by Stephen Langton, an Archbishop of Canterbury. Langton put the modern chapter divisions into place in around 1227 A.D. The Wycliffe English Bible of 1382 was the first Bible to use this chapter pattern. Since the Wycliffe Bible, nearly all Bible translations have followed Langton's chapter divisions. The Hebrew Old Testament was divided into verses by a Jewish Rabbi by the name of Nathan in 1448 A.D. Robert Estienne, who was also known as Stephanus, was the first to divide and print the Bible divided into standard numbered verses in 1555. Since that time, beginning with the Geneva Bible, the chapter and verse divisions employed by Stephanus have been accepted into nearly all the Bible versions." From an online source.

Paul begins this section in 12:1, “Now concerning spiritual gifts...” He needs to talk about spiritual gifts because there were haughty people in the Corinthian church who claimed a higher degree of spiritual sophistication. They were known as the *pneumatikoi*, the spiritual ones, and they claimed their gifts made them superior to others, because they felt closer to the Spirit. They were making others feel inferior because of their apparent lack and it was dividing the church. Paul insists this is not thinking with the mind of Christ. Sure we are gifted in many ways with a “variety of gifts, but by the same Spirit; and there are varieties of service, but the same Lord,” different activities activated by the same God. “To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good.”

Being the consummate pastor-theologian that we was, Paul urges them to realize whatever the Spirit bestows upon us it is for the common good. He shifts to the body metaphor – many members, many parts, but still one body. Each body part is equally important in the making of the body. Just like each gift is equally important for the sake of building up the body of Christ. Paul pushes the metaphor even further, that sometimes there are weaker members or parts of the body that need special care and treatment, they need to be honored. Indeed, Paul tells us, sometimes the body – whether our physical bodies or the body of Christ, meaning the church – has to pay special attention to the weaker parts of the body, otherwise there will be disease or division. In other words, the *pneumatikoi*, in claiming to be spiritually superior are acting contrary to the Spirit of God who cares equally for all. They can’t see how their actions are contributing to a sense of inferiority in members of the community; they can’t see how such attitudes actually break fellowship because in judging them so they are actually separating themselves from their sisters and brothers in Christ – and that is not the way of Christ. “If one member suffers,” Paul insists, “*all* suffer together with it; if one member is honored, *all* rejoice together.”<sup>3</sup>

*Now you are the body of Christ* – this statement is the focus of the entire section. You are the body of Christ and individually members of it. Now you are the body of Christ, so act like it! Not some of you – all of you – and God has appointed people with different gifts, with different tasks, different skills, different perspectives, to play a roll in the building up of the church. You can’t all have gifts of healing. You can’t all be prophets. You can’t all be preachers. So stop being jealous of each another. Stop striving to be like everyone else. *Instead, make space for all people to use their gifts, make space for one another, and make space for all people to thrive.* It is here that we begin to have a sense of what Paul means by love. If you want to strive for something, then I’ll give

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<sup>3</sup> Emphasis added.

you something to strive for, something worthy of your efforts, the still more excellent way.

Early in the first century, one prevailing attitude toward Christians, especially among Greek and Roman intellectuals, was that Christians were mentally disturbed. (There are many today who feel the same way about us and sometimes with good reason.) Followers of Christ were considered social misfits, misanthropes – that is antihuman or inhuman – even immoral by the ethics of the empire, because they took seriously in their communal life Jesus’ mandate to “love one another (John 15:12).”<sup>4</sup> We of course associate Jesus with love, as does Paul in this text. But I think we Christians *need to be very clear* about what we mean by love.

Sometimes we think love, whether divine or human love, as doing good to another, of goodwill, or sometimes pity. We think to love is being good or doing charitable acts. But love is more than doing good. There are plenty of do-gooders performing charitable acts, very often without any real empathy with those they are helping. If we equate God’s love with doing good then we get into all kinds of theological difficulties when bad things actually happen to people.<sup>5</sup> Does this then mean that God no longer loves us because we are not the objects of goodness? I don’t think so. Indeed, who wants only a do-gooder God, any way, if this God is not going to share my experience? I don’t. I need to know that God shares my experience. So that when Jesus calls us to love it has to mean more than “like one another” or “accept one another,” more than “be nice or good to one another,” it has to mean more than “tolerate or put up with one another.” And it has nothing to do with romantic love.<sup>6</sup> When the first Christians encountered the radical depth of God’s love in the face of Jesus Christ they had to find a new vocabulary to express the power of their experience. They turned to an obscure and rarely used Greek word – *agape* – to best explain what God’s love is like. Sometimes *agape* has been rendered as selfless or sacrificial love. But I think perhaps a better way of describing what Jesus is talking about, and Paul, is *empathy*.

*Em-pathos* means to share or participate in *pathos*. And *pathos* is suffering. But it can also mean experience. Empathy requires imaginatively putting yourself into the life

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<sup>4</sup> In fact, pity and compassion were considered the failings of a weak nature. The Stoics considered such actions unreasonable. Oliver Davies, *A Theology of Compassion: Metaphysics of Difference and the Renewal of Tradition* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2005), 235.

<sup>5</sup> Significant insight of Paul S. Fiddes, *Participating in God: A Pastoral Doctrine of the Trinity* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2000), 169ff.

<sup>6</sup> On the relationship between Christian and romantic love, see the classic text, Denis de Rougemont, *Love in the Western World*, trans. Montgomery Belgion (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983).

of another, wondering what it's like for someone to feel and experience life, to wonder what it must feel for another to be human, wonder how they see the world, and then doing everything one can to empower and support, honor and cherish their experience. When Moses learns that God has seen the suffering of God's people, Moses discovers that God is empathic, that God suffers with humanity, and then acts to remove that suffering (Exodus 3: 7-8). But the decision to act is rooted in God's participation in human experience. This divine way becomes clearly focused in the life of Jesus, where God participates in human suffering and experience through Jesus. Jesus shares our suffering, our plight, our joys, and our sorrows.

Christian love as empathy means putting myself in the skin of one who is suffering and then deciding what I can do to alleviate or if not alleviate at least share in the suffering. It means imaginatively putting yourself in another's pain in order to apprehend or fathom it and in that moment determine how you might respond. For truth is, "there can be no love without suffering." Theologian Daniel Williams is helpful here, when he writes, "[For] suffering in the widest sense means the capacity to be acted upon, to be changed, moved, transformed by the action of, or relation in relation to another."<sup>7</sup> To suffer love means to be *acted upon* and maybe this is the greatest threat to love in the church and the wider world, for to be aware of another's feelings is to *participate* in them, to be *influenced* by them. To love is to be in relationship where what another experiences alters one's own experience. It's the sharing of experience that transforms – and maybe this why such love is so rare in the world because to love another means inevitably means to be changed, to take on another's suffering and pain means one will be changed. And most of us simply will not go there without the grace of God.

Christian love as empathy also means putting yourself into another's joy and happiness, and discovering the source of another's joy and happiness, even if it might not be your own. This is just as difficult as sharing another's pain. Christians suffer with those who suffer and rejoice with those who rejoice.<sup>8</sup>

This is what Paul is calling the church to. Every time we heard "love" in the Greek, it's *agape*. This is not a wedding text, but a *life text* in that it shows us what human life can look like, first in the church and then in the world, what is possible and available to us with God's help, when empathy directs our lives. In other words, Paul is saying, "*Put yourself in the position of the weaker members of the community. Imagine what it*

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<sup>7</sup> Daniel Day Williams, *The Spirit and the Forms of Love* (Welwyn: James Nesbit, 1968), 117, cited in Fiddes, 170-171.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. the quotation from the worship bulletin: "Never was anything in this world loved too much." Thomas Traherne (1637-1674), *Centuries*.

*must feel like for them when you pneumatikoi go on about how spiritual you are!” You see, empathy is the kind of love that is patient and kind and does not insist on its own way. It is not selfish or narcissistic. It bears all things for the sake of the other. Believes all things for the sake of the other. Hopes all things for the sake of the other. Endures all things for the sake of the other. This way of being will never die because it is how God loves – loves you and me. This is the kind of love, empathy, I believe that is to be alive in the church of Jesus Christ, connecting us to Christ and to one another empathically.*

This is a great way to pattern a marriage, of course. It works in every relationship. Love means making space for all people to use their gifts, honoring and valuing another’s experience, making space for one another, making space for all people to thrive. This is the way of Jesus Christ who in every relationship calls us to go deep, to live *in* and *for* and *with* the other. It shapes how we meet strangers, friends, enemies, people we fear or dislike, it informs intercessory prayer, shapes our politics, our way of being in the world, how we respond to world affairs, read the newspaper, watch the news as war breaks out in the Middle East. It allows us to share in solidarity with the joys and the sorrows of all God’s people. You’re probably feeling this is too much for anyone to bear. Is it too much to bear for us to bear? *You better believe it!* But there is no alternative if one is in Christ. This is how Christians love. Too much for us to bear? Yes, if you try this alone. Don’t try this alone. We don’t do this alone. *Together*, we are the body of Christ. This is the empathic way of Jesus Christ that sets us apart from the rest of the world. It’s the way the Spirit calls everyone one of us and then equips us to follow.

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