

Epiphany 4 / February 2, 2025

1 Corinthians 13:13

“So now faith, hope and love abide, these three; but the greatest of these is love.”

Faith, hope and love

The church at Corinth was a divided group. This threatened the integrity of their congregation and diminished the effectiveness of their outreach ministry. Unity is important for the well being and function of the human body and for the well being of the church, the body of Christ. When one part of the body fights against another part the whole body suffers. Jesus said, *“a house divided against itself cannot stand.”* In the letter to the Galatians St. Paul warned, *“But if you bite and devour one another watch out that you are not consumed by one another.”* An external threat unites the defenses of the body to meet the challenge, be it a human body or the body of Christ. An external threat can strengthen unity as each part joins together for the common good. Nothing good comes from an internal struggle, save for the purging of what is unhealthy and destructive. The Corinthians engaged in an internal struggle over their pride in the gifts they had received from God. Paul urges them and by extension us and all Christian congregations, to seek the most excellent way by walking in love, recognizing in fellow believers the most important gifts of the Holy Spirit; faith, hope and love.

No matter how well gifted a person may be, she or he is nothing and gains nothing if he or she does not have the foundational gift of faith. No matter how talented people may be, they are nothing more than a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal, if they seek glory for themselves and do not teach the Christian faith by preaching salvation by grace alone received through faith in Christ alone. The essence of the Christian faith is not speaking in the tongues of men and of angels, it is salvation by grace through faith in Christ Jesus. The essence of the Christian faith is not miracles, gifts of healing, helping or administrating an organization. The essence of the Christian faith is faith in Jesus as our only God and Saviour. The essence of the Christian faith is that He alone is our hope for salvation in time and for eternity. The essence of the Christian faith is that God is love and He expresses His love fully and unconditionally in giving Jesus to be the Saviour of all people, especially of those who believe. The greatest and essential gifts of the Spirit are faith, hope and love, these three. The greatest of these is love, because the love is God’s love, given to us freely and abundantly for the sake of Christ Jesus.

The Corinthian congregation had a number of people gifted with particular gifts of the Holy Spirit, speaking in tongues, miracles and healings. That was a blessing if understood correctly and used properly. Those gifts were a blessing to the possessors if they were received in faith and used in love for the blessing and benefit of the whole body. Jesus chose seventy disciples, blessed them with power to heal and authority over unclean spirits and sent them to preach the good news to the villages of Galilee. It was a thrilling experience. They were elated when they returned, telling Jesus 'Even the unclean spirits submit to us.' Jesus cautioned them not to rejoice in the powers they were given over unclean spirits, but to rejoice in the gift of faith, that their names were written in heaven. The first and most important gift of the Spirit is faith in Jesus as God and Saviour. Many who followed Jesus lost their faith in Him, despite the power they had received to heal and work miracles. Faith is the foundational gift by which we come into fellowship with God through Jesus Christ. Through faith in Christ Jesus we receive the love of God and are given birth to a real and living hope of eternal life.

The proper use of the gifts of the Spirit, including the gift of faith, is their expression in love in our relationship to other people in general and with our sisters and brothers in Christ in particular. God so loved the world that He gave Jesus to be its Saviour. The church is the body of Christ for which He bled, suffered and died to make His own. We serve the world in love by holding out the promise of forgiveness and the hope of eternal life by proclaiming the gospel of salvation, received through faith in Jesus' Name. The world has no hope. Its best hope is that we came from nothing and return to nothing when we die. There is no hope in death for the world. In the letter to the Thessalonians, Paul reminds us of the real and living hope we have in Christ Jesus in all things, especially in the presence of death. He reminds us we do not grieve as do those who have no hope. We believe Christ died and rose again and that through Him God will raise all who sleep in Him. We share this hope with the world by sharing Jesus as its only God and Saviour.

We share this hope with one another and with fellow believers. We gather together as the body of Christ so we may encourage one another in our common faith. We encourage one another so we do not grow weary, discouraged and otherwise fall away from faith in Christ Jesus. The author of Hebrews urges us not to give up the habit of meeting together, because the Holy Spirit strengthens and encourages our faith when we gather to hear the word, receive the sacrament and share in prayer and fellowship with one another. Paul in our text and elsewhere in his writings, teaches us to use the gifts the Spirit gives us to support and encourage

one another in faith. If we use our gifts, talents and abilities without faith and for ourselves, we gain nothing and they benefit us nothing. When we use them in faith for the benefit of the whole body of believers and to the glory of God in Christ Jesus, we cover a multitude of sins in forgiveness and reap a harvest of life in eternity.

Faith, hope and love abide, these three. But Paul says the greatest of these is love. The love that Paul speaks of is no human love, it is God's love, expressed daily in countless ways, expressed fully in Christ our Saviour. No human was as gifted as Jesus; God from eternity, a human being in time. Yet He came not to be served or to serve Himself. He served us and all people by atoning for human sin and offering Himself as our Saviour. He used His divine gifts for our service. In the same way He empowers us with His Holy Spirit to use the gifts He gives in love, in service to one another.

We don't all have the same particular gifts of the Spirit, but we all share in the faith that is common to all who believe. We don't all have the same particular gifts of the Spirit, but we are all gifted with the Spirit that we may use our gifts in loving service to one another and to the whole body of believers. The love of which Paul speaks, that is patient and kind, that bears all things, believes all things, hopes for the best and never ends, is the love we receive from God through Jesus our Lord and Saviour. Faith, hope and love abide by the grace of God. The greatest is love because our faith and our hope are founded upon God's love. His love knows no bounds. His love never ends. We love because He has first loved us.

The first and foundational gift of the Holy Spirit is faith. Through faith we receive the love of God in Christ Jesus. God values nothing more highly than faith. Abraham believed God and God declared him righteous in His sight. The author of Hebrews says that without faith it is impossible to please God. Faith pleases God, because it takes His word to heart and believes Him. Faith and hope walk hand in hand. Through faith in Christ Jesus, we have hope in all things. God gives the gift of faith through the word and by the working of the Holy Spirit, so we may receive His love in forgiveness for the sake of Christ Jesus and have good hope in all things. Hope is the daily experience of faith in action. God pours His love into our hearts through faith Christ Jesus. In Him we have hope in time and for eternity.

When all other gifts of the Spirit have fulfilled their purpose in our lives, faith, hope and love will remain, but the greatest is love. The greatest is love, because the love is God's which never ends. The love is God's, expressed fully in Christ Jesus. The greatest gift God gives is His love through which He blesses us with faith and hope. Faith is the first gift of the Spirit and of incalculable value, because through

faith in Christ we have hope in all things. However as valuable as it is, faith will not last forever. Christ will return. When Christ returns, we will no longer live by faith. Faith will have passed into sight. Hope too will pass away. Everything we have hoped for in Christ will be realized. Love alone will remain, but even at that it will seem different. We will experience God's love in Christ to the fullest, not just for a time but for eternity.

As we wait, we walk with God through faith in Christ Jesus, using the gifts He had given us for the blessing and benefit of each other and the whole body of Christ. We walk in His love awaiting the day faith passes into sight, hope is fulfilled and we experience the fullness of God's love in resurrection to life everlasting. God in His grace keep us to that day. In Jesus' Name. Amen.