



THE POWER OF LOVE

In today's Gospel, we hear that Jesus has returned to Nazareth, his hometown. From the passage just preceding this one, we know that he has read in the synagogue from Isaiah's prophecy: to preach the good news; proclaim release to captives, recovery of sight to the blind and liberty to the oppressed. Jesus proclaims that he is to fulfill this prophecy, and that these are all part of his mission. At first, the people speak favorably of him.

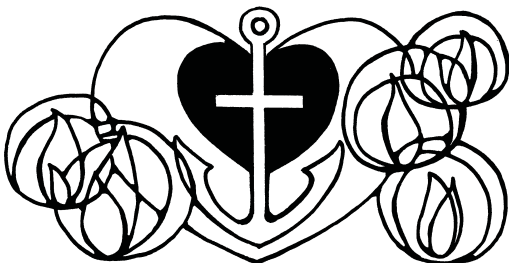
Unfortunately, many of the people find it difficult to accept the message that Jesus brings: God's love extends to all people, even those outside the Chosen People.

Often Jesus pointed out the love and faith that he found among people whom some Jews considered undesirables. The parable of the Good Samaritan, the faith of the Centurion with a sick slave, the repentance shown by the sinful woman, all place one of the undesirables at the center of a faith-filled example. Jesus even recalled events from the time of the prophets Elijah and Elisha that showed God's love poured out on foreigners. God showers his love on all of creation. We are recipients of it and are called to do our best to share it with others, even those who have hardened themselves against the invitation to respond to love.

Helping us understand how we are to do this is at the heart of the beautiful hymn of love from Paul's letter to the Corinthians, which we also heard today. It is one of the most popular readings chosen for weddings, and it certainly expresses the ideal love to be lived out in the marriage covenant between husband and wife. However, Paul points out that love is a vital component in *all* of our relationships. Earlier in his Letter to the Corinthians, Paul noted that the spiritual gifts of teaching, healing and serving one another were essential to the well-being of the community. Now he makes it clear that to perform a charitable deed, or even a pious act, without love is an empty exercise. To profess a strong faith but to lack love makes one's words a *noisy gong*. It is love that ties all the spiritual gifts together and makes them pleasing to the Lord.

We may know some people who seem to have no love within their hearts. We may hear on the news of hardened criminals or terrorists who carry out terrible crimes, and we wonder what happened to the love. Fortunately, we do not have to judge the actions of those who are not lovable; we only have to judge our own. Jesus tells us to *Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you* (Mt 5:44). In another teaching, Jesus exhorts us to turn the other cheek and give our shirt to the one who steals our coat (cf. Lk 6:29).

Of course this takes work on our part; sometimes a great deal of work. It may not be easy to love a grumpy relative who needs companionship or a neighbor whose tree drops its leaves in our yard, making more work for us. But we can strive to empty ourselves of all resentment and decide to fill those difficult relationships with love, perhaps, by sharing a cup of coffee or lively conversation over the back fence. Paul said it so well today when he taught that, in the end, there are but three things that last, faith, hope and love, and the greatest of these is love.



Faith, hope and love remain, these three; but the greatest of these is love....1 Corinthians 13:13