

SERMON – QUINQUAGESIMA – 06 MARCH 2011
St. John's Anglican Church, Greensboro, North Carolina

I Cor. 13: 1-13

St. Luke 18: 31-45

+In the Name of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Ghost. Amen+

On a cold, icy winter morning nearly 35 years ago, the sun not yet up in the sky, the telephone rang in the home of a young clergyman. An unfamiliar voice began by saying, "Reverend, I don't know if you have noticed, but that pile of wood beside your house which you cut last summer for fuel is shrinking quickly day by day. I have been meaning to call you, but wanted to mind my own business. There is a neighbor of yours that goes over every morning with a wheel barrow, and he is helping himself to the fruit of your labors. I thought you ought to know...By the way, he is out there now." The neighbor in question had just been released from prison and was apparently using the skills which had originally landed him there!! A step out the front door followed and the two were suddenly face to face. When confronted with the evidence squarely in hand, the neighbor became angry and brusquely defended his actions because it was cold in his daughter's home and they needed firewood. Besides he said, "You're a preacher", stating the obvious. "You should not mind--You're **supposed to love** everyone". It was a curious definition of charity!! This episode is revealing, not only in its boldness, but in the fact that we live in a time when love has been redefined as an attitude that excuses all behaviors. If love is present, it is argued, it will be soft and compliant, and generally accepting of any and all manner of human frailties. It will lead people to acquiesce and ignore hurtful things and avoid accountability. During the time of the early Church the phrase used in a demeaning way to describe Christians was, "See how they love each other"! Like so many words it is easy to define love so that it comes to mean what we want it to mean, and is re-created according to our images rather to be taken as it is given by God.

This great text from St. Paul, perhaps behind John 3:16, is as well known as any in scripture. It is the grist for many a wedding ceremony, yet it is not about love as our world has come to define it, but rather is about the love God has for the world. In a rare example of fluid poetry, which is not Paul's strength, we are confronted with a needle's point. Paul takes all human accomplishments, endeavors, and prized actions, and after enumerating them simply says they all pale when seen alongside God's actions in Christ. For Paul the supreme example of this thing called love is the cross. It alone is the final stamp marking what the heart of God looks like in concrete and specific action. Thus he can say that this love alone is what literally holds the world together for it has born up, struggled under, and endured all things. There is nothing cheap, easy, or transient here. It is fitting that on this last Sunday before we begin our annual contemplation of the cross during Lent that we should have this lesson in our worship. It literally primes us and prepares the start of that journey, because it gives us a clue to the treasure which

Lent will reveal—the love which God has for us. We see it dimly in ourselves and in one another—but nevertheless, we have seen it and it is our destiny to carry it into this life.

Historically, the church has used these Sundays before Ash Wednesday to talk about the virtues of the Christian life. Now candidly virtue is not a word that is part of our everyday vocabulary. The closest we come to thinking about it these days is in the political arena when someone stands us and waxes eloquently on “family values”, or perhaps when we think of persons like Mother Teresa of Calcutta. Our culture seems more interested in un-virtuous behavior as demonstrated by the fascination with Charlie Sheen’s struggles. Interestingly, one of the oldest definitions of virtue means literally, “to have an inherent power to produce an effect”. Listen to that carefully—“to have an inherent power to produce an effect”. On the one hand there is a self-contained set of values and quality of living, which is intensely focused, and when applied has and creates an outcome that would not have happened in the same way without it. VIRTUE means to take seriously that what we do and the reasons for our actions matter immensely. Why should the Church call our attention to such apparently outmoded concepts that attract little attention in this day and age? Because to act well is not enough, if the reason for action is self-serving, self-aggrandizing, or belies our deepest values. We as God’s people are called to be something and not merely to appear to be. We are called to bear in this world the kind of love that when all is said and done matters because it changes the conditions of life for others.

The collect or prayer of the day, as it is often called, is striking in its simplicity and clarity. Listen—“O Lord, who has taught us that all our doings without charity are worth nothing; send thy Holy Ghost and pour into our hearts that most excellent gift of charity, the very bond of peace and of all virtues, without which whoever lives is counted dead before thee...” This prayer begs of God that we be given the aid and assistance to not miss the one thing that lasts and is really eternal. To love is indeed a wonderful experience and carries with it layers of emotion and feeling. But as anyone of us knows all too well, love based solely on feelings, wishful thinking, or the immediate conditions of life will fade and dissipate. The love held up for us by St. Paul is not that which we have inherent to ourselves, but is the love God has for us. It is His care for us, seen in Jesus who is in his body the very act of self-giving love, that holds the world together; that endures all the world can throw at us; that bears all the weights life can place on us; that believes in God’s ultimate victory even when all around us just now would appear to the contrary; that endures until the final completion of our salvation. It is this love which God offers to us, and when we enter His ways and come to see ourselves and others through His eyes rather than our partial images, we come to find true and lasting hope. We come to live connected with and bound to God and in that relationship the virtue of love comes to grow.

Some days when I am absorbed with the struggles of my life and those I bear responsibility for, I forget to pay attention to the hope I have been offered. I act as if all depends on my work, and from that I begin to act as if all things outside my focus are

somehow trivial or unimportant. It is a view of life created by seeing thru a mirror darkly. And then my little granddaughter, Sam, comes up and wants to sit in my lap and give me a hug. She puts her tiny arms around my neck, kisses me selflessly and says, "Grandpa I love you." In that smallest of actions the world comes back to a proper balance. It is in relationship with God that we are most made whole, most at peace, and find that which endures and gives us the virtue of a love that endures.

Amen+