

6.10.2018 Trinity 2 (1 Cor. 13)

In our second lesson this morning, we listened to a beautiful description of love, a very specific kind of love. In Greek it is agape, in Latin it is caritas, and in the King James Bible it is charity: the selfless, sacrificial, unconditional love of God for man, of man for God, and the Christian for his neighbor. St. Paul writes (1 Cor. 13:4-8), *“Charity suffereth long, and is kind; charity envieth not; charity vaunteth not itself, is not puffed up, Doth not behave itself unseemly, seeketh not her own, is not easily provoked, thinketh no evil; Rejoiceth not in iniquity, but rejoiceth in the truth; Beareth all things, believeth all things, hopeth all things, endureth all things. Charity never faileth...”*

These beautiful and very powerful words are found in one of the most well-known and frequently quoted passages in the Bible. If you want to hear an amazing description of love, just open to what is often referred to as “the love chapter” – 1 Corinthians 13. These inspired words written by St. Paul are so comforting and so familiar, yet as I looked over the list of lessons appointed for this Sunday, I came across another Scripture. A passage that is just as powerful as that description of love, but in a very different way, and as I read it to you this morning you may notice a common thread that runs through both Scriptures.

This lesson, meant to be read today at Evening Prayer, tells the story of the stoning death of St. Stephen, a Deacon, the first Christian Martyr, a man the Bible says was (Acts 6:8) *“full of faith and power, and did great wonders and miracles among the people.”* The book of Acts tells us that Stephen spoke boldly about the truth of the Gospel to the Sanhedrin (the men that legislated all aspects of Jewish religious and political life), and (7:54-58) *“When they heard these things, they were cut to the heart, and they gnashed on him with their teeth. But he, being full of the Holy Ghost, looked up steadfastly into heaven, and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing on the right hand of God, And said, Behold, I see the heavens opened, and the Son of man standing on the right hand of God. Then they cried out with a loud voice, and stopped their ears, and ran upon him with one accord, And cast him out of the city, and stoned him: and the witnesses laid down their clothes at a young man's feet, whose name was Saul.”*

Saul is the common thread in these two Scriptures. This young man who was an accomplice in the brutal death of the first Christian martyr, would later be known as St. Paul, the man that God inspired to write the definition of Christian love! The book of Acts is where we meet Saul before his conversion on the road to Damascus, and if you were a Christian in these early days he was not a person you would want to encounter. Acts describes Saul of Tarsus as a zealous Pharisee bent on protecting Judaism and eliminating the followers of Jesus. After he consented to the death of Stephen we are told that (Acts 8:3) *“he made havoc of the church, entering into every house, and haling men and women committed them to prison.”* We also read here that Saul was (Acts 9:1), *“breathing out threatening and slaughter against the disciples of the Lord.”* “Threatening and slaughter!” The verses in the lesson for Evening Prayer describe him as a murderer, and in the lesson we read this morning, God used this man’s hand to write to the Church about selfless, sacrificial, unconditional love.

Does that seem more than just a little strange to you? Time and again as I read the Bible I am astonished by its truth. This is not the way we would write the story. We would not choose the man that was the enemy, the one that was wreaking havoc on the Church and breathing out threatening and slaughter to write the chapter that defines Christian love. Once again we are confronted with the mystery and wonder of God. His thoughts are not our thoughts. His ways our ways (Isaiah 55:8). He dwells in light inaccessible (1 Timothy 6:16). As I considered these lessons, I remembered a poem that I shared with you a few years ago. This poem perfectly describes the way God touched my life, perhaps it relates to you as well, and I offer these words this morning as the only possible explanation for the complete transformation in the life of Saul.

The poem is titled “The Touch of the Master’s Hand,” and it was written by Myra Brooks Welch in just five minutes:

’Twas battered and scarred, And the auctioneer thought it hardly worth his
while To waste his time on the old violin, but he held it up with a smile.

“What am I bid, good people”, he cried, “Who starts the bidding for me?” “One
dollar, one dollar, Do I hear two?” “Two dollars, who makes it three?” “Three

dollars once, three dollars twice, going for three,"

But, No, From the room far back a gray bearded man Came forward and picked up the bow, Then wiping the dust from the old violin And tightening up the strings, He played a melody, pure and sweet As sweet as the angel sings.

The music ceased and the auctioneer With a voice that was quiet and low, Said "What now am I bid for this old violin?" As he held it aloft with its' bow.

"One thousand, one thousand, Do I hear two?" "Two thousand, Who makes it three?" "Three thousand once, three thousand twice, Going and gone", said he.

The audience cheered, But some of them cried, "We just don't understand." "What changed its' worth?" Swift came the reply. "The Touch of the Masters Hand."

"And many a man with life out of tune All battered and bruised with sin Is auctioned cheap to a thoughtless crowd Much like that old violin

A mess of pottage, a glass of wine, A game and he travels on. He is going once, he is going twice, He is going and almost gone.

But the Master comes, And the foolish crowd never can quite understand, The worth of a soul and the change that is wrought By the Touch of the Masters' Hand.

Listen to how the book of Acts describes Saul being touched by the Master's hand. "*And as he journeyed, he came near Damascus: and suddenly there shined round about him a light from heaven: And he fell to the earth, and heard a voice saying unto him, Saul, Saul, why persecutest thou me? And he said, Who art thou, Lord? And the Lord said, I am Jesus whom thou persecutest...*" (Acts 9:3-5).

When the resurrected Christ touched Saul, it was death to the old man and life to St. Paul the Apostle. The hand of God touched Paul, "*And he trembling and astonished said, Lord, what wilt thou have me to do?*" (Acts 9:6).

From that day forward, Paul tells us his only work was to “*present every man perfect in Christ Jesus*” (Colossians 1:28b) His life became a tireless proclaiming and living out of the message of the Cross, which is: We will not be auctioned cheap! The worth of our soul is found in the blood of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. He has wiped off the dust, tightened up the strings, and we are all a new creation in Him, bought at the highest price. God has shown us our worth through the sacrifice of His Son (John 3:16), and when we begin to understand that truth our lives are forever changed as we, like St. Paul, “*labour, striving according to His working, which worketh in me mightily.*” (Colossians 1:29).

So, no matter what the foolish crowd says of you or your worth, be encouraged this morning, because God is at work in you “*mightily.*” None of us are left on our own to collect dust and fall into disrepair. We simply must be willing to respond to the touch of the Master’s hand. May we follow the example of St. Paul, and let his words be our constant prayer: “*Lord, what wilt thou have me to do?*”