

### 3.3.2019 Quinquagesima (1 Corinthians 13:1; Luke 18:31)

A new priest was out visiting the homes of the people in his congregation. At one house, someone appeared to be home but no one answered his repeated knocks at the door. He took out his card, wrote "Revelation 3:20" on the back, and stuck it in the door. That particular Bible passage appropriately begins, "*Behold, I stand at the door and knock.*" The following Sunday, he found that his card had been discreetly returned in the offering plate with this message added: "Genesis 3:10." Reaching for his Bible, the priest found the passage and started to laugh. The verse read: "*I heard thy voice in the garden, and I was afraid, for I was naked.*"

The season of Lent begins this Wednesday. Lent, in a sense, is standing at the door and knocking. Are you afraid and naked, or are you ready to answer the door and walk with our Lord as He goes up to Jerusalem, where "*all things that are written by the prophets concerning the Son of man shall be accomplished*" (Luke 18:31). We gather together this day, in God's house, to hear His Word and to receive His most precious Body and Blood to the end that in Him, through Him, and by Him we may always be ready. Ready to answer His knock at the door. Ready to take up our cross. Ready to put our whole trust in Him, to gladly do His will, and to truly serve Him all the days of our life.

On Sunday morning, while the world sleeps, we meet to ready ourselves through Word and Sacrament. The Word that our Lord speaks to us this morning in the Epistle and Gospel lessons is love. In the Epistle, we heard 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, "*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...*" (1 Corinthians 13:4-8).

These beautiful words are found in one of the most well-known and

frequently quoted passages in the Bible. This powerful description of love is often read at weddings or printed on greeting cards, but I wonder how often we hear these words without truly listening to what they say. When we take this passage seriously, when we consider these verses from the lenten perspective of self-examination, what we quickly discover is a selfless, sacrificial, unconditional love that is beyond our own ability. On our own, we are not patient and kind. Apart from Christ, we can be envious, rude, and easily provoked. Without God, we could not bear anything, believe anything, place our hope in anything, or endure anything. From a lenten perspective, this passage is much more than a lovely ideal. This passage is a means for us to recognize that the true fulfillment of love is found in only one place, and in only one Person: our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

Holy Scripture affirms that truth by telling us that “*God is love*” (1 John 4:8, 16), and so we discover that in the Person of Jesus Christ, Love has a Name. His Name is Jesus. Every quality of love that St. Paul describes is found in Him. Jesus is patient and kind. He does not envy or boast. He is not proud, rude, self-seeking, or easily angered. He rejoices not in iniquity, but rejoices in the Truth. He bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, and endures all things. Prophecies fail, tongues cease, knowledge vanishes away, but God, in the Person of Jesus Christ, never fails. He is the Word who was with God in the beginning. He is the Word of God spoken from the foundation of the world and into eternity, and I cannot imagine anything more comforting than the realization that this One Word, this One perfect utterance of God, is Love.

Now consider the way our Gospel lesson this morning helps us more completely understand the selfless, sacrificial, unconditional way in which God defines love. The passage begins by setting the scene, telling us that “*Jesus took unto Him the twelve, and said unto them, Behold, we go up to Jerusalem, and all things that are written by the prophets concerning the Son of man shall be accomplished. For he shall be delivered unto the Gentiles, and shall be mocked, and spitefully entreated, and spitted on: and they shall scourge him, and put him to death: and the third day he shall rise again*” (Luke 18:31-33).

As you bring to mind the events described in our reading, be sure to view

them in this context. Jesus has fixed His eyes on the sorrowful path of suffering that will lead to His death on the Cross. Because He is fully God, our Lord knows every detail of all that He is about to endure. Because He is fully man, a person can only begin to imagine the excruciatingly painful mental suffering such knowledge would produce. Yet, instead of turning inward and focusing on His own suffering, our Lord continues to manifest the unsearchable depths of His selfless love by ministering to the least of these, even to a blind beggar.

The Gospel continues: *“And it came to pass, that as He was come nigh unto Jericho, a certain blind man sat by the way side begging: And hearing the multitude pass by, he asked what it meant. And they told him, that Jesus of Nazareth passeth by. And he cried, saying, Jesus, thou Son of David, have mercy on me. And they which went before rebuked him, that he should hold his peace: but he cried so much the more, Thou Son of David, have mercy on me. And Jesus stood, and commanded him to be brought unto Him: and when he was come near, He asked him, Saying, What wilt thou that I shall do unto thee? And he said, Lord, that I may receive my sight. And Jesus said unto him, Receive thy sight: thy faith hath saved thee. And immediately he received his sight, and followed him, glorifying God: and all the people, when they saw it, gave praise unto God”* (Luke 18:35-43).

This man, an outcast who sat by the side of the road begging, was both blind and poor. In the Gospel of Mark we learn that the man’s name was Bartimaeus (Mark 10:46), but his name may as well have been any of ours, because blind, poor Bartimaeus is you and me and the world that our Lord came to heal and save. Before we *cried* out to Jesus, we were wandering aimlessly in spiritual darkness, blinded by the *“god of this world”* (2 Corinthians 4:4). Before we *cried so much the more*, we lived a life of spiritual poverty, a life separated from the endless riches that God alone provides through the Person and work of His only Son our Savior Jesus Christ.

It is only by the grace of God that we, like Bartimaeus, recognized Jesus as the long expected Messiah, the Son of God who came to *“save His people from their sins”* (Matthew 1:21). It is only by the grace of God that we, like Bartimaeus, refused to let the crowd silence our cry for mercy and healing. It

is only by the grace of God that we, like Bartimaeus, received infinitely more than that for which we asked. You see, Bartimaeus asked to receive his sight, yet by the grace of God, Jesus said to him, “*Receive thy sight: thy faith hath saved thee.*” Miraculous physical healing is a great blessing, but the faith that saves, the hope of heaven, and the love of God is the real miracle in this passage and in our lives.

St. Paul writes, “*And now abideth faith, hope, charity, these three; but the greatest of these is charity*” (1 Corinthians 13:13). The greatest of these is Love. The greatest of these is Jesus, and He is knocking at the door of your heart. This Lent, don’t be afraid. Open the door and let Love in.