

2.19.2023 Quinquagesima (1 Corinthians 13; Luke 18:31-43)

Eighty years ago, on a dark, frigid night in the North Atlantic, a torpedo from a German submarine struck the US Army transport *Dorchester* as it headed toward a base in Greenland. The torpedo ripped a hole below the ship's waterline, and the *Dorchester* (which was loaded to capacity with 902 people aboard) quickly began to sink. In the chaos of abandoning the ship, with hundreds of people fighting for their lives, four men began to take charge: Lt. George Fox, a Methodist; Lt. Alexander Goode, a Jewish Rabbi; Lt. John Washington, a Roman Catholic Priest; and Lt. Clark Poling, a Dutch Reformed minister. These men were all chaplains who joined the army after the United States entered World War II, and who, on that night, chose to organize the evacuation instead of saving themselves.

After the torpedo's blast, the chaplains went to the ship's deck and began to hand out life jackets, and when there were no more life jackets to hand out, they simultaneously removed their own and gave them to four frightened young men. One survivor would later say that "was the finest thing I have seen or hope to see this side of heaven." The *Dorchester* sunk in just 20 minutes, and as it went down, those in nearby life rafts could see and hear the four chaplains, arms linked, braced against the slanting deck, offering prayers and singing hymns. These men have received many honors and words of praise over the years, but President Truman said it best when he stated: "They obeyed the divine commandment that men should love one another. They really lived up to the moral standard that declares: *Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends*" (John 15:13).

The story of these chaplains, and the self-sacrificial love they poured out on those who were placed in their care, is no ordinary description, but an extraordinary demonstration of the particular type of love St. Paul defined in our Epistle this morning. In the passage we read from 1 Corinthians, Paul provided us with a vivid illustration of the highest form of love, the relational love between God and man, a love that is in this earthly life most often demonstrated by the way we love one another. As our Lord said, "*By this shall all men know that ye are my disciples, if ye have love one to another*" (John 13:35). Paul tells us that this love, or *charity* in the King James Version, "*suffers long, and is kind; love does not envy; love does not parade*

itself, is not puffed up; does not behave rudely, does not seek its own, is not provoked, thinks no evil; does not rejoice in iniquity, but rejoices in the truth” (1 Corinthians 13:4-6 NKJV).

In every contact we have with one another, this is the way the love of God directs us to conduct ourselves. I once heard it said that an easy way to discover if authentic Christian love has taken possession of your soul is to insert your own name into this text. Would it be true to say that (insert your name) *___ suffers long, and is kind; ___ does not envy; ___ does not parade itself, is not puffed up; ___ does not behave rudely, does not seek its own, is not provoked, thinks no evil; ___ does not rejoice in iniquity, but rejoices in the truth.* I’ve found this simple exercise in self-examination to be both convicting and necessary, especially now as we prepare to enter the penitential season of Lent.

Of the many characteristics of Christian love that St. Paul identifies, there is one that seems to stand above the rest, especially when we consider the heroic actions of the four chaplains aboard the *Dorchester* on that frigid night in the North Atlantic. On any given day a person may have described one of those men as long suffering or kind, a man who is not provoked, one who thinks no evil, but on that particular night, when each of these men was faced with the decision of whether to save their own life, or freely lay it down for another, the characteristic of love that appears to be most evident is that love *“does not seek its own”* (1 Corinthians 13:5).

Perhaps the greatest characteristic of authentic Christian love is unselfishness. A love that *“does not seek its own”* is a love that freely gives, and never selfishly grasps. A love that wills and works to ensure the good of another, regardless of the cost to oneself. A love that is willing to be broken and poured out as a living sacrifice, to the end that others may be blessed by such sacrifice. The unselfish, sacrificial love of the four chaplains is seen clearly in the fact that they had no intention of leaving that ship. Even in their darkest hour they did not seek their own, they didn’t place their own pain or need or right to life above that of their fellow men. Even in the hour of death, they did not seek their own good (their own life), but instead they each sought the good of another by laying down their life (1 Corinthians 10:24), and in doing so, they loved as Christ has loved us (John 13:34).

Love “*does not seek its own.*” These chaplains demonstrated that truth eighty years ago on a frigid night in the North Atlantic, when, even in the hour of their own death, they chose to place the needs of others above their own, and when we consider today’s Gospel reading we recognize the truth that 1900 years before that tragic night, our Savior Christ, in and through His Life and Ministry and Passion and Death was the One who set this example for them, and for all of us. It was our Lord and God who, as President Truman noted, gave the “divine commandment” to love one another, and He not only gave the commandment, He actively demonstrated such perfect, sacrificial, unselfish love to the end that we may truly follow His commandment to love one another “*as I have loved you*” (John 13:34).

The passage we read tells 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...*” (Luke 18:31-33). From the beginning of our Lord’s ministry, the Cross was the goal. His life was one of service and sacrifice, and here Jesus spoke to the twelve about many dreadful things He would soon willingly endure as He poured out His life as the sacrifice for the sins of world. These words were written by St. Luke, but St. Mark’s parallel account contains a detail we must not miss. Mark tells us that as they were going up to Jerusalem, “*Jesus went before them: and they were amazed; and as they followed, they were afraid*” (Mark 10:32). While the twelve failed to understand the words Jesus spoke to them, Scripture tells us “*they understood none of these things*” (Luke 18:34), it appears that they were able to recognize something very different in our Lord’s demeanor and behavior as He so deliberately walked in front of them on the path that led directly to His Passion and Death.

It is impossible for us to comprehend such things, but try to imagine what caused this difference in the way Jesus was acting, try to imagine the unthinkable mental suffering our Lord would endure on this journey to Jerusalem. As God, He would have perfect knowledge of every single detail, of all that would come to pass as He sacrificed His life, and as a man, He would have the human ability and human experience to know and to

understand how horrific His death would be. It was God who inspired the prophet Isaiah to write that *“His appearance was so disfigured beyond that of any human being and His form marred beyond human likeness”* (Isaiah 52:14), and it was God in the Person of Jesus Christ who endured such unimaginable brutality at the hands of His creatures.

Jesus said to the twelve, *“Behold, we go up to Jerusalem...”* and as He led them on the way to the Cross with an intense singularity of purpose that filled the Apostles with awe and fear, it must have seemed as though absolutely nothing could stop Him, but the Gospel text reveals that on this journey as He approached 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...”* (Luke 18:35-40).

Jesus stopped. When it seemed as though nothing could delay His appointment with death, with the weight of the sins of the world on His shoulders, at a moment when we would expect Him to be concerned with nothing but His own Passion and Death, the cries of one poor, blind beggar stop this great procession to the Cross. Our Lord’s suffering, His work of redemption, His victory over sin and death, the climax of history would have to wait as Jesus stopped to heal this man, because love *“does not seek its own.”*

So often we act as though we’re just too busy to visit the sick or imprisoned, too poor to clothe the naked, feed the hungry, or shelter the homeless, too weighed down by our own difficulties to answer a cry for help, but was Jesus too busy or too burdened to stop and heal a blind man as He walked on the path that led directly to His Passion and Death? Were the four chaplains, when they had but 20 minutes left on this earth, were they too busy or too burdened to organize an evacuation, give away their lifejackets, and lay down their lives for another? When we act like we’re too busy, too poor, or too weighed down by this world to minister to those in need, it may be more truthful to say that we’re just too busy to love.

As our Savior Christ went up to Jerusalem, the entirety of creation longed for redemption, and yet our Lord stopped, He stood still in order that He may give sight to a poor, blind beggar who cried out to Him for mercy. May God have mercy on us, may He stop and restore our sight to the end that we would no longer seek our own, but instead love as Christ has loved us.