

So far in this Pre-Lenten season, we have been encouraged to work for God and His Kingdom, preparing soil and planting the Word of God with diligence and trusting in God to bring the increase. We have also focused upon the call to us to exert every effort in pursuing a righteous and devout life through our preparations for a holy Lent. Then this morning we read St. Paul's great chapter on charity, or "love", the term which is more familiar to us. This love is not that which appeals to the self, to our individual affections and desires. This love which St. Paul writes about in the 13th chapter of his first Epistle to the Corinthians is self-giving love or *agape*, the Greek word used here. This is a costly love, a love that never refuses to put other before self, and the compiler of the Prayer Book reminds us this day that it is not our great works that earns us merit with God. It is not the size of our church or the amount of our contributions that earn us favor in God's eyes. It is not the unparalleled systematic theology that we might intellectually construct and hold within our minds. It isn't even the self-sacrifice with which we might serve our neighbors. These things could really be great, but none of them is worth anything to God if they are done without love for Christ, or without the love of Christ for those around us. We must see even the least significant person as better than ourselves and deserving of our best service, because they bear the image of God. The specific point here, to be clear, is that our Lenten disciplines are useless if they are not practiced with the same love that God has bestowed upon us in Christ.

So if you only remember one thing from this meditation, remember this. Your Lenten disciplines are not as important as the love of God and of your neighbor. To forget this is to miss the mark. The ideal is that our Lenten disciplines are exercised in the love of Christ, and their target is our hearts, because what we do with our bodies shapes our souls. The disciplines themselves are a tool; they are not the goal.

The Apostle in this great ode to love ends it with the following: "For now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face: now I know in part; but then shall I know even as also I am known." But how does this relate to love? How is seeing clearly important for the life of charity? This beautiful and poetic language points us to the fact that we, in this present age, do not see the world clearly. Our vision is blurred, our understanding is incomplete, as if we were looking through a tinted piece of glass that distorts the light passing through it. But St. Paul here also insists that some day the glass which divides us from the ultimate reality will be shattered, and we shall see clearly. Why? Because we will see the face of Jesus. We will gaze without any barrier upon God, and in His face we will know ourselves completely as God Himself knows us. And God does in fact know us completely, every detail and thought and fear and doubt, because He loves us completely. Perfect love is premised upon perfect knowledge.

And this is precisely why it is so difficult to truly love as God loves. Without perfect knowledge, perfect love remains out of our reach. And yet in this chapter, St. Paul beautifully unveils the model of perfect love and dares us to become what he reveals. One day when we know perfectly, we shall be what we strive for today; but the fact that we love imperfectly today does not excuse us

from attempting what God commands. “Beloved, let us love one another: for love is of God; and everyone that loveth is born of God, and knoweth God.”

How then are we to move forward and do that which we are commanded to do, without (as it seems) the capability actually to accomplish this task? Well, how was it that the blind beggar on the side of the road passing through Jericho knew to call to Jesus as He passed by? Somehow this blind man, Bartimaeus as St. Mark calls him in the 10th chapter of his gospel, knew enough about Jesus to call out, “Jesus, thou son of David, have mercy on me.” It is fair to conclude that someone had told him about Jesus, Jesus who had healed the blind, and the lame, and the deaf; and this bit of knowledge gave Bartimaeus hope – a hope that he had never before in his life dared to have. “The blind were really receiving their sight?” he must have thought. “Oh, if this Jesus would only pass by, then I could receive my sight! I would scramble every direction all at once if I could just grasp on to his sandal.” Also somehow Bartimaeus determined that Jesus was the Messiah, because he called him, “Son of David”; for it was a descendant of David that would rule over the house of Israel forever. He might have reasoned that only the Messiah could do the things that Jesus did.

Whatever the case, Bartimaeus had some knowledge, and in this knowledge, he had hope, and in this hope he had faith, and in this faith, he had love. Perfect love? No, of course not; for he did not have perfect knowledge. But he knew at least two things: 1) he was blind, and 2) Jesus could heal him. And these two things were enough. So when he heard from the crowd that they were following Jesus to Jerusalem, this wretched and beggarly and blind and defective man called out with all his might. We read that the crowd had no time for him. “Hush, you filthy man! Jesus has more important things to do!” No doubt this was true. The salvation of the entire human race depended upon Jesus fulfilling His mission. They knew about Jesus too. He had even told them, well at least the twelve apostles, what was to happen to Him. So they knew this, but their spirits were as blind as the beggar's eyes for they could not comprehend what Jesus had told them.

But Bartimaeus was undeterred in the face of their reproaches, and he called out all the more. Wouldn't any of us do the same? To regain sight is to be reborn. “Thou Son of David, have mercy on me!” I cannot imagine the desperation of the blind man in this moment. The only hope to be cured is a man who is mere feet away from you, and you must get his attention! But finally, Christ hearkened to the shouting and the disturbance in the crowd, commanding that the blind man should come. Mark 10:49 reads, “And they call the blind man, saying unto him, Be of good comfort, rise; He calleth thee.” In a moment, his desperation was replaced with hope unbounded. Bartimaeus had been heard, and the master called him to approach. In Mark's gospel, the narrative continues in verse 50. “And he, casting away his garment, rose, and came to Jesus.” The ratty old cloak was no longer needed. It no longer defined blind Bartimaeus; it just got in his way. Leave the old life behind, Bartimaeus; the new life awaits.

Then, almost laughably, Jesus asked the blind man, “What wilt thou that I should do unto thee?” This question was not for Jesus' sake. Of course Jesus, along with everyone else then present, knew

what this man wanted. The question was for Bartimaeus' sake so that He could confess his belief in Jesus, the Messiah, the Lamb of God who would take away the sin of the world. And he responded, "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."

The once blind Bartimaeus used to see dimly with his spiritual eyes. But that darkened glass was broken; it was no longer a barrier; so that he then saw Jesus face to face. He was granted the grace to look directly into the face of Christ, into the face of God. The Messiah knew him perfectly, and no doubt, in that moment, Bartimaeus knew himself perfectly, knew the people perfectly, and, I would suppose, understood exactly what Christ was to face in the days ahead. From this revelation did the now seeing man shrink away into the crowd and disappear? He did not. Instead He followed his Master, glorifying God for the faith given to him and then for the grace that he had received at the hands of Jesus Christ. He once was blind, but now he saw. Clearly. Precisely. And he fell in with the train of people that were following the Lamb of God that was to be slain. Would he too be captured? Harrassed? Imprisoned? Killed? It was certainly a possibility, but now the priorities were different. Now there was something larger to live for and to die for. Jesus had opened his eyes, and there could be no returning to the way things had been.

For us, it is common, expected perhaps, excused certainly, that those of us who have been followers of Jesus Christ for a long time grow numb to the wonder of our illumination, of our regeneration, of the gift of the Spirit given to us. Our blindness was healed so that Jesus became the lens through which we viewed everything. Yet the sorrow and brokenness of the world to some degree numbs us to the grace of sight that we have received. In a real sacramental sense, we look upon the face of Jesus Christ every week; and yet that old blindness thinks it will keep us from seeing clearly, and therefore from loving fully, perfectly.

It is a hard place for us to exist – seeing the reality with our spiritual eyes, but not yet seeing Jesus Christ as He will be revealed to us in the next world. Still the priority of love remains. We must with our restored spiritual sight follow Jesus to the cross. What will we find there at the base of that most terrible and glorious tree, watered by the blood and water that runs down from the wounds of Our Savior? We find that old man, the blind one in that old ragged cloak. We find that old life from which we have been reborn. We find that our living death has died on that tree, and that day by day our new life in Christ compels us onward as we glorify God and rejoice, while those around us also give praise and glory to God. We must always return to the cross so that we may put to death again and again the old life that has died; so that we may live with the new life of Christ, with the new eyes of Christ, and with the love of Christ.

We are commended this morning to the love of God. We are commanded this morning to love like God, to love more perfectly than we do. We certainly still stumble forward and bungle up the opportunities that Christ brings our way. Our love is not perfect. But the only way to love more, to

love our God and fellow man better, is to gaze more intently, more constantly, into the face of our Lord and King, Jesus Christ.

This is what Lent is about. Strip away the nonsense of this world, enter into the sufferings of Christ, mourn your sin. Let the hunger of your Lenten fast be turned into a hunger for Jesus, a hunger for His love, and thus a hunger to love those around us. And then let that hunger be satisfied by the Lamb who was once slain and now sits on the right hand of the Father in Heaven. Feast on Him, this morning around the Lord's Table, and may we feast for evermore in His very presence when we see Him face to face.

AMEN.