

## Fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Love

February 03, 2019

Fr. Tim Clancy, S.J.

The longer I live, the more I learn the truth of Paul's closing words today--that in the end there is three things that last, faith, hope and love and the greatest of these is love.

We are created by love; we are created for love. It is through love that we first come to be. And it is within love that we grow into our best self. A child needs love as much as it needs food and drink. Without love, we wither. Without love, we turn to stone--our hearts become hard, dry, brittle.

But just what is love?

Paul offers a litany of attributes. A couple are direct: Love is patient, love is kind. But most are indirect, identifying what love is not. As if circling a target, which, like the divine itself, is surpasses any literal description. And so he circles: Love is not jealous, love is not self-absorbed. Love is not arrogant, love is not rash. Love is not scheming, it does not brood over injury, nor does it rejoice over the destruction of others. And then he turns to superlatives that point more than describe what they mean: Love finds what is beautiful and sublime in all that it touches. Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

In short, love sees what is and cherishes what is, just as it is. It does not presume to already know what can and cannot be, but awaits in patience and rapt attention for the other to reveal itself, revering the unique individuality of each and every person, place and thing.

Today's Gospel offers a good illustration of what love is not. Jesus returns to his hometown. But those who have known him since he was a kid cannot see him for who he now is. As soon as Jesus begins to speak some begin to whisper--we know this guy. Who does he think he is?

They couldn't believe it. For they thought they already knew all they needed to know about this guy. Jesus could not surprise them. No wonder he could work no wonders there.

To see and to cherish what is, we must be willing to admit that we do not already know all there is to know about something or someone. To see and to cherish what is, we must be willing to let go of our own predetermined judgments and pre-conceived categories. To see and to cherish what is, we must embrace what we are not, what is other than ourselves, what may be different than we expect. To love another we must have the courage to extend ourselves beyond ourselves.

Love is potent. Love can liberate us from the narrow constraints of our own sin and fear. For through love we learn that what matters most is not whether we succeed in being who others want us to be, but whether we succeed in being who we are called to be, from our mother's womb.

In the intimacy of love, we do not need to impress, we have only to be honest.

Now I hardly need to tell anyone here, honesty in a relationship takes time and effort. It is not the work of a moment, or a day, or even a year. It is rather the fruit of a lifetime. Honesty in a relationship is hard work. It often takes courage. It can be very humbling but it is ultimately empowering. For it is only when we can be honest with someone else, someone whose love means the world to us, and discover that their love is stronger than our shame, or our anger; only when we have learned that their love is stronger than our weakness, that we can learn to be honest with ourselves. It is through loving another, and basking in their love for us that we can also begin to learn how to love ourselves—not to pity ourselves or to pander to ourselves, but to actually authentically love ourselves in spite of our only too evident sin and failures.

Now there are moments in our life when we may feel we have been deprived of any such love. There are times, in the words of the old spiritual, when we may feel like a motherless child. But love can sprout from the humblest of roots. It can feed off the smallest of gestures. Today it may be imperfect, today it may be weak, but as Paul reminds his readers, ultimately it cannot fail. Ultimately, there can be no such thing as a motherless child. We may long for more, we may deserve better, but we are never wholly without love.

For in addition to the love of others there is also the love of the one who is wholly Other, who transcends all things, who embraces us all. In short, there is the love of the one who is love itself, who has loved us into being, and whom we were created to love in turn with all our heart, and all our mind, with all our soul and all our strength. Indeed all our desires, however blind and starved they may be, however shackled to past pain, however weighed down by a seemingly empty future, all our desires are ultimately gropings towards such love, yearnings to be who we have been called to be, from our mother's womb.

Let us then turn to one another and to this table. Let us reconnect with this love and with the person who incarnates it in our heart, our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. And may we rededicate ourselves to our own call to transform love into flesh in the world, our common home.