

Love is the central goal of Christianity. Jesus proclaimed Love as the greatest commandment when asked by the religious teachers of his day. “Love God” is the first and greatest; and a second is like it, “Love your neighbor as you love yourself.” The apostle Paul proclaimed Love as the greatest of spiritual gifts, in that famous chapter 13 to the church at Corinth. (“Faith hope and love abide, but the greatest of these is love... so make love your aim.”) Yes, make Love our aim, our goal! Jesus said that’s how people will know that you are my disciples, seeing that you love one another!

We might say, “we *know* these teachings!” But to know them and to *practice them well* are two different things. We often learn by opposites, and the apostle Paul in his teaching, goes right to opposites: What love is NOT! (“Love is not jealous, not boastful, not arrogant, not rude, does not insist on its own way, not irritable, not resentful)... WOW, a long list of negatives, what love is NOT! He does start with two positives: “Love is patient, love is kind.” But patience and kindness can be very difficult, so the world marches along in so many things that are NOT love! We *all* have a hard time living up to the simple virtues of patience and kindness! Paul’s words on love in 1Cor 13 are so well known that people have requested them at weddings for years. Yet the homily or sermon that often follows, as I have done, is to say how difficult it is to live up to these *ideals*... therefore we need good doses of prayer and grace, regularly in our lives!

Let’s look briefly at some of Paul’s negatives. Love is “not jealous” (how tempting to think of what a neighbor has, or the great beauty or strength some neighbor has). Love is “not boastful or arrogant” (how tempting to prove that we are

superior in some way... and Paul specifically addressed this in our first reading: “knowledge *puffs* up (pride and arrogance), but love *builds* up (affirming and encouraging). Love “does not insist on its own way” (I think this one is one of the hardest parts; We all are tempted to say “MY way... or the highway!” Do we want to be right and control the outcome, or have we learned to let go, to collaborate, to work as a team?) Love is “not irritable” (don’t we all get irritable, in bad moods?) Sure, but I guess Paul is saying we have to work on our moods, recognize our irritability, and perhaps lessen it inside ourselves, before it explodes into angry words or actions.

Back to the positive descriptions of Love: “patience and kindness!” We know that another definition of patience, yes, in the King James Version, is that love is “long suffering.” Love is compassionate toward the mistakes and flaws of another. One of the ways to grow in such compassion is to realize that we are all part of one humanity, all very much alike, and that “There but for the grace of God, GO I.” I’m sure I have mentioned the Catholic spiritual writer Joyce Rupp, a favorite of my mother’s prayer group. In her book entitled “Boundless Compassion,” she quotes another great spiritual guide, Henri Nouwen, a Catholic priest who taught at Yale and Harvard. Let’s listen to his very challenging words: *Compassion grows with the inner recognition that your neighbor shares your humanity with you. This partnership cuts through all walls, which might have kept you separate. With compassion you can say: in the face of the oppressed, I recognize my own face, and in the hands of the oppressor I recognize my hands. Their flesh is my flesh. Their blood is my blood. Their pain is my pain. Their smile is my smile. Their ability to torture is in me. Also*

*their capacity to forgive I find also in my self...In the depths of my being, I meet my fellow humans, with whom I share love and hate, life and death.*

I was talking with some friends recently about family tragedies in our community due to alcohol abuse. We know that it can lead to violence in relationships and can cause the break up of many marriages. The most obvious of tragedies is that alcohol abuse is a major cause of death in car accidents. Thus, stronger penalties for Driving Under the Influence.

But while talking about drug and alcohol abuse as the cause of much tragedy, I remembered that little saying, "THERE, but for the grace of God, GO I!" I realized that given all the difficulties of life, I could have taken to alcohol as an escape, as a dulling of pain. I could have gotten addicted as a result, which then could cause a downward spiral of problems. There, but for *grace*.... We can all fill in the blank... There but for wise friends, There but for some healing therapy, There but for gratifying work to keep me occupied, "THERE, but for the grace of God, GO I." I attended the celebration of Rev. Chris Ney's doctor of ministry degree in which he spoke of the superabundance of alcohol addiction in Chile, especially amongst the very poor. Seeing so much misery, our Pentecostal partners there prohibit or strongly discourage the consumption of alcohol. The Chilean pastors who visited here in Massachusetts were dismayed at the acceptance of alcohol at our church gatherings. They have chosen total abstinence, so "THERE (into addiction), but for the norms and worship and fellowship of the Pentecostal church, GO (many of their members)."

We must be patient with others. We must be “long suffering” at times, because we are all part of a fallen, imperfect world. Love is our central goal in the Christian faith. And “goal” is an important word, because we admit that it is hard work; we admit that we strive for the ideal of love, while admitting that we always fall short and have more work to do.

I’ll close with a word about prayer, because the “two greatest commandments” that Jesus spoke of start with the command to love GOD. We remember the Latin words of the ancient monks; “Ora et Labora” which means Pray and Work! So many people comment on the peacefulness and love at monasteries... No, the monks are not perfect, but they do *work* and *pray* for more peace and love in themselves and in the world.

Prayer connects us with God, the Source of all Love and goodness, so that by praying we keep learning to love and keep growing in love. All action starts with thought, and prayer is a form of thought. So if we think and ponder the ways of the Holy Spirit, commune with God and Christ in quiet meditation, we can then put into practice more loving ways. With Paul, let’s make Love our goal, and our prayer!... We can pray for the infusion of Love into our being. With all the sickness and tragedy in the world, good to remember that: THERE, but for the Grace (or Love) of God, GO I. Amen.