

A father, mother, and a 40-day-old baby walk into a temple. It sounds like a joke, but it turns out to be the setting of this somewhat obscure festival observance. I don't know how often you've celebrated the Presentation of Our Lord, but I suspect it was probably in 2014 or 2020 – when it also fell on a Sunday. We'll move Epiphany, All Saints, and Reformation around to make sure they get celebrated, but I don't think there's often a big push to make sure we hear this part of the story that happens 40 days after Xmas.

But Luke includes this story in his Gospel so that the reader would know that Jesus was firmly grounded in the Jewish tradition. God acting in the world through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus **the Christ** means that God began the salvation of the world within the covenantal people of the 1<sup>st</sup> century. Simeon's prophecy further grounds what God is doing in that tradition.

“...for my eyes have seen your salvation,  
<sup>31</sup> which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples,  
<sup>32</sup> a light for revelation to the Gentiles  
and for glory to your people Israel.”

God's salvation is not a random act intended to save individuals from their sin. God's salvation is a loving claim on all peoples – Israelite and Gentile. What God does is always centered in the community, as was much of life at that time.

Today, we tend to think much more individually and – to be honest – selfishly about...well everything probably, but certainly about God's salvation. Human nature drives us to think that way – but that isn't the salvation that is described in the Gospels. And it isn't the salvation that Paul brings to the church of God in Corinth. Salvation comes to **all peoples** and it binds us together within God's love. Paul moves us from imagining ourselves to be the body of Christ, to be a body that lives centered in God's love.

I've long had a history of singing *They'll Know We are Christians by Our Love* at camp. The first verse goes like this:

*We are one in the Spirit, we are one in the Lord  
We are one in the Spirit, we are one in the Lord  
And we pray that our unity will one day be restored  
And they'll know we are Christians by our love, by our love  
Yeah they'll know we are Christians by our love*

The love that is described in that song is much closer to what Paul was getting at than how you might usually think about this passage in 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians 13.

I'm sure you've heard this passage shared at a wedding, and it fits there well enough, but that's not really what Paul was thinking about. The words he offers certainly are good to keep in mind when you're in a romantic relationship, but the power of these words is in framing a communal life that has been the purpose and heart of Paul's message.

After outlining the differences there are in peoples' gifts, after outlining how those gifts come together for the common good, and that together they create a living breathing organism that is the collective body of Christ...after all that, it's still not yet a complete picture of life in God's Kingdom. It's not enough to recognize the different gifts in each member. Recognizing the body of Christ isn't the end of the conversation...without love...without love, where would you be now? Without love we are nothing more than clanging cymbals.

Paul has masterfully and intentionally walked them through this discourse about how they compare their gifts and work together but he hasn't yet concluded his argument about what it's like to be the people of God. He hasn't yet resolved the inherent conflict within human communities – a place where comparison and competition are far too easy. He moves his argument forward by saying, **“And now I will show you a way that is beyond comparison.” (12.31b)**

The use of individual gifts, the symbiotic relationship of the different parts of the body are all centered and grounded in love. It's not the romantic love of fairy tales, it's not the calculating “love” of 1<sup>st</sup> century marriages, it's the all-encompassing, unconditional love of God. And he outlines exactly what that looks like.

This is where we have to pay attention to grammar if we're going to capture Paul's message. As it's translated into English, it's pretty easy to let it become a static conversation about concepts: love is patient, love is kind. It all sound so nice, but the way Paul wrote it, or at least the way Paul's message was written down, encompassed action. It's not just that love **is** patient or kind. Love **acts** patiently. Love moves through the world with kindness. Nothing that is done with arrogance is part of acting with love.

In the end, Paul argues, none of the gifts matter if they aren't employed with loving humility. Imagine how different the world would be if we focused on avoiding arrogance and acting humbly. Imagine how the message of love we have would be received if it was offered with deep respect for the one hearing it.

The truth of God's love becomes most recognizable when it is filtered through the loving actions of those proclaiming it. We can't claim to follow God and act contrary to all these defining characteristics of love that Paul offers.

They won't know we are Christians by our dogmatic proclamations screamed in anger. They'll know we are Christians...they'll know the love of God when we act lovingly and humbly to change the world.

Without love, where would we be now? Amen.