

Trinity Church in the City of Boston

The Rev. Morgan S. Allen

September 26, 2021

Regathering Sermon Series III, 1 Corinthians 13:8-13

Come Holy Spirit, and enkindle in the hearts of your faithful, the fire of your Love. *Amen.*

This morning will complete our three-week reflection on the Apostle Paul's hymn to Love, our chosen invitation into "The Life of the World to Come."

To begin our Program Year, we considered the "*Possibility of Love*" – that leap of faith declaring Love as the source and substance of all creation – and, in verses 1-3, we traced Paul's insistence on Love's necessity ... taking heart in Ted Lasso's Loving generosity, no matter the opposition he faces.

Last Sunday, we considered the "*The Power of Love*" – the inspiration of Love set in action, love in deed – and, by verses 4-8, we defined Love as setting the needs of others before our own ... witnessing Love's strength in the ministry of Sister Constance and the Martyrs of Memphis who gave their lives during the 1878 Yellow Fever epidemic.

This week, we consider "*The Promise of Love*" – the ultimate concern toward which all righteous Love points – and we focus on the chapter's concluding third, overlapping last week's coda ... and turning to another Paul – twentieth-century theologian, Paul Tillich – for our summation of this treasured verse.

According to Tillich, our ideas about God seek to satisfy two basic needs: one, "statement of the [Christian message's enduring] truth; and, two, "interpretation of [that] truth for every new generation."ⁱ Serious considerations of God move between these: "the eternal truth of [their] foundation and the temporal [context into] which [that] eternal truth [speaks.]" Limited as theologies necessarily are, most tend to prioritize one or the other basic need, either "[sacrificing] elements of the truth" in order to be more relevant or timely; or failing "to speak [effectively into] a given situation."ⁱⁱ

Tillich names the Christian message's "truth" as our "**ultimate concern**" ... *our ultimate concern* ... and he defines that concern as the "abstract translation of the great commandment: 'The Lord, our God, the Lord is one; and you shall **love** [– *shall love* –] the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength."ⁱⁱⁱ

Realizing Love of God as our ultimate concern necessarily renders "**preliminary**" all concerns of our temporal situation – "situation," as Tillich defines it, the sociological, "scientific, artistic, economic, political, and ethical" condition into and through which theology "expresses its interpretation of existence."^{iv} For Tillich and for us, preliminary concerns are not unimportant, they simply must never be mistaken as ultimate.

Returning to 1 Corinthians 13, Paul distinguishes ultimate and preliminary concerns, writing:

Love *never* ends.

But as for prophecies, *they will* come to an end;
as for tongues, *they will* cease;
as for knowledge, it *will come to an end*.^v

Beginning with our overlap from last Sunday – “Love never ends,” that crisp summary of all that has come before it – Paul identifies Love as our ultimate concern. To work the short syllogism supporting that claim, we can appeal to 1 John 4:16 –

If “God is Love”^{vi} and
if God is our ultimate concern; then
our ultimate concern is Love –

and in the section that follows, Paul catalogues the credentialed wisdoms that the Corinthians most admired – that bustling exchange of ideas about their world and its condition – and, pointing to their inevitable endings, he contrasts each with Love’s singular endurance.

As with the Corinthians, the felt urgency and importance *we assign* our situation can keep *us* from living Love’s priority, and Tillich proposes three relationships between our ultimate and preliminary concerns.^{vii}

In the first, we set our ultimate concern alongside other interests and *tacitly* undermine its ultimacy by what he describes as “mutual indifference.”^{viii} In this scenario, we concern ourselves with God avocationally, as a hobby we occasionally tinker along with needlepoint, lawn care, and assembling those little boats inside of bottles. Adherents of this mode, might turn toward a hazy sense of the divine in moments of convenience or urgency, perhaps self-identifying as “spiritual, but not religious.” Others thus engaged may witness the *inverse* – “religious, but not spiritual” – ensuring they are marked as “Present” for worship on Christmas and Easter, but attending for cultural or other unserious reasons. Lest we overestimate ourselves, all of us have drifted into this indifferent haze during one time or another.

In the second relationship, we *actively* elevate a preliminary concern to ultimacy. Within theological circles, Tillich points to the rise of American fundamentalism as an example of this mode, writing: “Fundamentalism elevates something finite and transitory [– of one instance, the idea of biblical inerrancy –] to infinite and eternal validity. In this respect, fundamentalism has demonic traits,” Tillich argues in the strongest terms. “It destroys the humble honesty of the search for truth[;] splits the conscience of its thoughtful adherents[; and] makes them fanatical because the [doctrine forces them to] suppress [core] elements of [the] truth which they [recognize as valid.]”^{ix}

We within self-styled progressive churches indulge in this same idolatry whenever we choose to prioritize the prophecies and tongues of *one* season, to the subordination of the Love that gives rise to *every* season. At our worst, we bless a single perspective of our temporal situation as inviolate, and, as prophets of a partisan Gospel, we create, mobilize, and commission zealots as civic antagonists rather than as Beloved reconcilers. Instead of offering one another Love, we grant ourselves permission to judge, to scorn, and to dismiss any who dare disagree with us and our preferred “knowledge.” Indeed, thinking like children, speaking like children, and acting like children, our pride blinds us from recognizing our kinship in fanaticism with the very partisans we claim to oppose: those inerrancy-believing, Fundamentalist Christians to our right.

Fortunately, the third relationship between ultimate and preliminary concerns offers a faithful, hopeful path, one that Paul’s poetry anticipates. 1 Corinthians 13 concludes:

When I was a child, I spoke like a child,
I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child;
when I became an adult,
I put an end to childish ways.

For now we see in a mirror, dimly,
but then we will see face to face.

Now I know only in part;
then I will know fully,
even as I have been fully known.

And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three;
and the greatest of these is love.^x

Paul declares that the promise of Love is **completion**, or, in the language we often pray, “fulfillment.” See, even the most righteous preliminary concerns remain nothing more than the dim reflections of a cloudy mirror, no more ultimately satisfying than that image of Trinity Church’s profile in the Hancock Building. When we greet Christ “face to face” – knowing and known fully – we no longer need *set God’s hopes* before our own, or act *in the spirit* of God’s Love, for *we will have become one in God’s Love*: God’s hopes *will be* our hopes, God’s Love *will be* our Love. No longer is there any I-ness or Other-ness, but completed and completely in God, there is ... only ... *Love*.^{xi}

Paul’s triad of faith, hope, and love matters, not only to distinguish Love, but, as Tillich proposes for the third relationship, to provide purpose for our preliminary concerns as bearers and “[vehicles] of the ultimate concern.”^{xii} With faith in this God, we order our lives by Love, even “participating” in God’s hopes without claiming ultimacy for ourselves.^{xiii} By conviction and action, then we aim our lives toward God, though we recognize that the promise of Love is not and has never been a “situational” outcome. Recall, Sister Constance *died* in service of the sick she tended, and Jesus’ earthly ministry ended in crucifixion ... let alone the notion that Coach Lasso and the Richmond Greyhounds will ever win a Premier League championship.

Likewise, as we at Trinity Church endeavor Love in the Life of the World to come, we may labor to vote fascists out of office ... we may share hard truths with one another ... we may advocate care for the creation we too easily take for granted ... but, as the Church, we never do so as ends *in and of themselves*, and we do so with no expectations of inevitable victory. This keeps us a *faith* community, not a political organization, for – if we are faithful – we will always choose Love before judgement, and shared understanding before any cause. Our aim will always remain fidelity, and never “success,” for we reach our aspired end only in God.

Our integrity as theologically serious – our very existence as the Body of Christ! – depends upon our keeping in right order our ultimate and preliminary concerns, and our only vocation is to bear Love for the world. Generous ... patient ... kind ... unrelentingly, indefatigably bearing God’s Love until the complete comes.

This is our humble work, and the promise of our Loving God.

Amen.

ⁱ Tillich, Paul. *Systematic Theology, Vol. 1*. The University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1951. Tillich names these categories in his introduction (pp. 3-7).

ⁱⁱ Ibid. Tillich also uses the more jargoned language of “kerygma” for Christian “truth” (literally, “proclamation”), and “apology” as “answering theology” (pp. 31-32). Helpfully, he notes, “[All theologies] must answer the questions implied in the general human and the special historical situation. Apologetics, therefore, is an omnipresent element and not a special section of systematic theology.”

ⁱⁱⁱ Ibid (and Deuteronomy 6:4-5).

^{iv} Ibid.

^v 1 Corinthians 13:8-10.

^{vi} John 4:16. “God is Love, and all who live in Love live in God, and God lives in them.” That, friends, is the ticket.

^{vii} Tillich, pp. 11-15.

^{viii} Ibid.

^{ix} Tillich, p. 3. In the text, he deploys the example for a slightly different purpose, but the reflection holds for this context, as well. I find compelling the idea that fanaticism’s reactivity has its roots in hiding and defensiveness, the “split conscience” Tillich describes here.

^x 1 Corinthians 13:11-13.

^{xi} In Tillich’s terms: “The being of God is being-itself. The being of God cannot be understood as the existence of a being alongside others or above others. If God is a being, he is subject to the categories of finitude, especially to space and substance. Even if he is called the ‘highest being’ in the sense of the ‘most perfect’ and the ‘most powerful’ being, this situation is not changed. When applied to God, superlatives become diminutives ... As being-itself God is beyond the contrast of essential and existential being” (pp. 235-236).

^{xii} Tillich, pp. 11-15.

^{xiii} Tillich, pp. 168-178. Tillich writes of how humankind can uniquely participate in God, without claiming ultimacy for ourselves, “Man occupies a pre-eminent position in ontology, not as an outstanding object among other objects,

but as that being who asks the ontological question and in whose self-awareness the ontological answer can be found ... Individualization and participation are interdependent on all levels of being ... Every relation includes a kind of participation.” (pp. 168-178).