

1 Quinquagesima – 1 Corinthians 13

In the second and third chapters of Revelation, our Lord Jesus writes letters of encouragement and warning to seven churches. In his first letter he addresses the church in Ephesus. He commends them for their faithfulness and hard work to oppose false teaching and sin. But he chastises them for one thing. He says, “You have left your first love.” He then warns them that if they do not repent then he will take away their lampstand. This congregation has been faithful, and they have endured hardships for the sake of the truth. And yet, you can have all faith to be able to move mountains, oppose false teaching with the eloquence of angels, know the right answers, and even give up everything you have. But if you have lost your first love, then you have nothing.

Love is much deeper than doing this or that good deed or knowing this or that fact about God. Love is poured into our hearts by the Holy Spirit himself. Because it isn't originally our love. It's God's love. God is love. And whoever abides in love abides in God, and God abides in him.

But what is this first love? This is love, not that we have loved God but that he has loved us and gave his Son to be the propitiation – the atoning sacrifice – for our sins. It is the love the Father has shared with his Son from all eternity. This same love prompted him to give his Son up for all sinners. It is the love the Son has received and shared with the Father from eternity. It is the same love that prompted him to obey his Father's desire to save poor, wicked, and completely unlovable sinners.

This love is not self-serving. It is self-giving. It is the love by which God was patient with Israel despite their frequent falls into sin and idol worship. It is his kindness to people from heathen nations, like Ruth who was from Moab yet found favor from the Lord when she came to Bethlehem. Though God is rightly a jealous God who will not share his glory with any false gods, he wasn't envious of these false gods as if they could offer anything better than he could. No, throughout the Scriptures we hear examples of God rescuing people from idol worship, calling Abraham out of darkness into his marvelous light, bringing Ninevah to repentance, visiting the widow from Zarephath, and showing compassion on thousands who didn't know him. It's the love by which God desires all people to be saved. He didn't predestine people to hell. He doesn't delight in the death of the wicked. No, the love of God doesn't plan to hurt or harm. By his love he is slow to anger.

Yet, this also isn't some flimsy version of love that has no principles. People think they know what love is. They say, “Love is love,” only to justify sin, which damages souls and ruins lives. Sodomy, trying to turn men into women and women into men, and killing unborn children – these are the farthest things from love. They cause irreparable harm not only to the body but especially to the soul. Our politicians think they are loving when they support these things. Recently, our president came out in support of the practice of invitro fertilization. This is the practice of using God's creation of human

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sperm and eggs to produce human embryos (also known as tiny little babies) to plant in a woman's womb. It's supposedly a compassionate practice, and the process leaves most of these tiny little babies either kept in a freezer or killed and used for research by so called scientists. It's evil. It's unloving. So don't be fooled by it, or you might lose the light of God's love.

The problem with sinful human reason is that it imagines that it knows love and compassion better than God. Maybe you have had a heart-to-heart conversation with someone who is caught up in sinful behavior. You get to know the struggles of this person, and you see things from his perspective. That's not a bad thing to do. But just because you feel bad for someone doesn't mean that you are loving him. Your bleeding heart can't make atonement for anyone's sins. Only Jesus did that. But he didn't do it by making excuses for sin. He bore sin and paid for our redemption.

Love therefore does not delight in evil. Love rejoices in the truth. This means that you don't delight in someone's misery either. Maybe this person is suffering because of his own immoral behavior. Love doesn't write him off, treat him as an irredeemable piece of trash, or boast about not being in the same pathetic position. Love speaks the truth, even when it's difficult to speak. It bears with the failures of those who have messed up. It believes that even those who have fallen to the deepest depths of sin can be redeemed. Love is therefore willing to go the extra mile in the hope that those who are ignorant and misled can learn and gain wisdom.

This is the love of God, which compelled Jesus to bear our sin, bear the misery of our guilt, and feel the burning wrath we all deserve. He was betrayed by his own close friend, handed over by his own people, mocked, spit upon, whipped, and nailed to a cross. And he bore it all willingly, counting the shame as a little thing compared to the joy that was set before him. In his obedience, he trusted in his Father and pressed on for the sake of our salvation. This is love.

St. Paul says that faith, hope, and love abide, but the greatest of these is love. Love is the greatest, because it comes before faith and hope, and it follows faith and hope.

The love that comes before faith and hope is perfect. It is fulfilled in the obedience, suffering, and death of the Son of God who loved us and gave himself up for us. This love is the object of our faith and hope. It is the grace and mercy of God in Jesus Christ for all sinners.

The love that is produced by faith and hope is not perfect in this life. In this sinful life, the love produced within us is always incomplete. Our selfish desires remain with us as our old Adam continues to cling to our dying flesh. Our sinful condition attempts to imitate this love, imagining itself to be kinder and more compassionate than God himself. Or it imagines that it can be righteous before God by this love, as if God produces love

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in our hearts so we can use it to earn his favor. No, love freely flows from faith and hope. Faith rests in the promise of God's loving forgiveness, life, and salvation in Jesus. Hope presses on with the confidence that God has secured this inheritance. And by love we share it with one another. We confess it to those who don't know it. And love is willing to suffer and put up with all sorts of unfair treatment, all because of God's saving truth.

Love doesn't earn anything for itself. Otherwise, it wouldn't be love. No, love is always giving. This is why it endures so much sorrow in this life. Love is willing to be hated by all and even looked at as unloving, all for the sake of honoring God and helping your neighbor. All the while, faith relies on God to honor us, and hope waits for this honor.

It's incredible that God has put such a gift in our hearts. It's hard to believe it when you consider the sin that still clings to you. But maybe it was hard to believe that you would be driving a real car someday, or that you would be married and have children, or that your children would be grown up. When you're a child you think like a child, and when you grow you put away childish ways. It's hard to believe that our dying and sin-stained bodies will shine like the sun with Jesus in perfect love. But when we reach that end, we will finally leave behind our childish ways. But in the meantime, God calls us to hold onto his promise with a childlike faith, confident that he who loves us will never forsake us.

It's easy to lose your first love. It's easy to forget why you loved the gospel. Christian children learn to sing "Jesus Loves Me" or "I am Jesus Little Lamb" or in this congregation, "We All Believe in One True God." And they love it. They are singing about their Savior, and they are learning about him. When you get older, it's easy to let the cares and troubles of life distract you from the joy of the gospel. But our Savior teaches us not to forget our first love.

Consider the example of that blind man in our Gospel lesson. He trusted in Jesus after hearing that he was passing by. After all, faith comes from hearing. He cried out to Jesus, confessing him to be the promised Messiah, the Son of David, waiting for his Lord to open his eyes. This is exactly what hope does. And then, after Jesus caused him to see, that beggar joyfully followed Jesus to Jerusalem, praising God. This is the first love God gives us. It's the love you see in your children when they sing the gospel and learn their Bible verses, all while bonding with their Christian friends who are learning the same things right along with them. It's the love that binds us all together when we sing hymns and the liturgy together.

Don't forget about this love. Because when temptations and trials come, and the devil wants to divide, scatter, and turn us against one another, what will bind us together? It won't be our own versions of love and tolerance, which we learn from this dying world and culture. No, the only thing that will cause us to stick together, to love and support

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one another, will be the truth that we confess and in which we rejoice. This is our first love. And we need to be nourished in it every single day of our lives. You fathers need to read this Word of your Savior to your families every day. If you're out of town, have your wife do it. Don't neglect your first love. Why did God give you children in the first place? So you could turn them into a less washed-up version of yourself? Didn't he give them to you to nurture them in his Word with the hope that you will see them in heaven someday?

This is also why we support and pray for our Lutheran schools. It's why I would encourage all of you parents not only to pray for our new Lutheran high school but seriously consider sending your children there. Our kids need to grow together in the love of their Savior. They need to learn to confess their faith together and sharpen one another with God's Word. I suppose we make do without a Lutheran high school. I didn't have one growing up. I went to health class and sat through all the social sciences where I was taught the world's false doctrine of what is falsely called science, love, and tolerance. I also had faithful parents and siblings who loved me and kept me on the straight and narrow. I'm sure many of you can relate. Yes, we have our monthly youth-group, our weekly Sunday School and Wednesday School. This is great, and I encourage you all to send your kids. But that's what, three hours a week, compared to about 30 hours a week of school? We have a chance to provide our children with more than what we had. Love doesn't envy. Love doesn't seek its own interests. Let us be driven by such love for the children of this congregation.

Our love for one another will never be perfect in this life. But the truth on which this love is based is perfect. It's the truth of God's Word, the good news of Jesus Christ who loved us and gave his life up for us. As we trust in this truth and hope to see it with our eyes, we begin to see it dimly in this life. But by God's love in Christ, we press on with the confidence that we will fully see him and fully know him even as we are known by him. May this love always bind us together. Amen.