

I CORINTHIANS 13:1-13

If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. If I give away all my possessions, and if I hand over my body so that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing.

Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

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. For we know only in part, and we prophecy only in part; but when the complete comes, the partial will come to an end. 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.

HEBREWS 11:1-3, 8-9, 13a

Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. Indeed, by faith our ancestors received approval. By faith we understand that the worlds were prepared by the word of God, so that what is seen was made from things that are not visible...

By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to set out for a place that he was to receive as an inheritance; and he set out, not knowing where he was going. By faith he stayed for a time in the land he had been promised, as in a foreign land, moving in tents as did Isaac and Jacob, who were heirs with him of the same promise...

All of these died in faith without having received the promises, but from a distance they greeted them.

THE THREE PILLARS: Part I

BLIND TRUST

I Corinthians 13:1-13
Hebrews 11:1-3, 8-9, 13a

A lot will happen between today and April 16, the Sunday we celebrate the resurrection of Jesus from the dead. Today, the earth is still snow covered in many places; elsewhere the grass remains dormant and the ground is brown and soggy. But in six weeks—oh, yes—daffodils will have bloomed, our lawns will require mowing, our frost-hardy vegetables will be emerging, baseball season will be underway and the NBA playoffs will be about to begin. A little something for everyone.

How do we know all of this will be occurring? Because we have faith. Because we know for certain that all of these events are assured. It is because our experience has taught us that even though spring may dilly dally around making its appearance, it most certainly will come.

We have no trouble believing this. We don't even question it. So why, we might ask ourselves, when it comes to spiritual matters regarding the existence of God, the reliability of God's promise to love us unconditionally and the truths that the gospels proclaim do we have such difficulty? Is it because we have been disappointed and hurt by life? Is it because we have fervently prayed for outcomes in our life circumstances and have been met with what feels like a wall of silence? Is it because we have gone through periods of great darkness and have witnessed tragedies and atrocities repeatedly throughout the course of history? Where can God be? How can a loving God allow these things to happen or to deny us what we really,

really need? Doesn't Jesus say it will be done to you as you believe?

And yet, even when it is 10 below zero in January and we are buried up to our keisters in snow and the polar vortex bears down on us, we still have 100% confidence that in April it will all be gone and we will be enjoying 75 degree days. What is with that?

Lent invites us to ask questions like this because it is a season for reflection and spiritual development. It is an opportunity to take some time to explore what goes on in our minds and hearts in an effort to take us to the next level of wherever we are in our spiritual journeys. In an effort to assist you in that endeavor, I will begin a three-part series today which will focus upon the beautiful 13th chapter of I Corinthians, Paul's soliloquy on love in which he identifies the Three Pillars of the Christian life—faith, hope and, of course, love. Today we will begin with faith. What is it? How does it function in our lives? And how can we help it to grow within us?

A starting point is acknowledging our desire for predictability. No matter where we have lived, spring has always followed winter and though it comes in fits and starts, it will definitely come. We trust that. But ever since we humans have bowed before deities, we have always been unsure about their intent and therefore nervous about divine responses to our behavior. When you get a new puppy, she will spend a whole lot of time studying you to figure out what you want and what she needs to do to get rewarded. And what she will need from you is reliability in your actions so that she can respond with behaviors that please you. In a word, she needs predictability. Now cats are a different species. They have an uncanny ability to turn the table on humans and make us figure out what will please them. But I digress!

Pardon the pun, but divining what the deity wanted was always a matter of discernment and highly uneducated guesses. And forget predictability! The gods have always seemed to take great sport in keeping humans off balance expressing their capriciousness in extremely unpredictable ways. One year the men perform fertility rites with temple prostitutes in the fields to seek a blessing upon the fall harvest resulting in a bumper crop and the next year there is drought and the next year an infestation of grasshoppers.

We seek predictability because we want certainty and that plays out in our desire to have a faith relationship to our God. What can we count on God for? Paul says that *faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen*. This is but one translation of Hebrews 11:1. Another text reads somewhat differently: *Now faith is the assurance of things now in existence. And it is the unveiling of things not seen*. In other words, faith begins by looking at the obvious; i.e. spring will follow winter.

This is the beginning of a rudimentary faith. It assumes that in the beginning there was nothing and that everything that exists comes from the mind of God. How else did it get here? Did the universe just decide on its own it would happen? Perhaps, but even that would imply an intelligence behind it all. As Paul says, *by faith we understand that the worlds were prepared by the words of God so that what is seen was made from things that are not visible*. Just because we can never know all the answers does not mean we cannot infer certain realities.

So this is the genesis of faith—the conviction that nothing could exist without God—a Supreme Being, a Super Intelligence—the name we give it does not matter. But it cannot stop there. The next step is to apply that observation to a confidence in God's promises for the future even though we cannot yet see any manifestation of those promises. In a sense, it calls for us to establish a Blind Trust in our Creator based upon what we can already see, understanding that the path to those promises—while guaranteed—will not necessarily be easy nor on a time table placed in our hands.

By faith, Abraham obeyed when he was called to set out for a place that he was to receive as an inheritance; and he set out, not knowing where he was going. By faith he stayed for a time in the land he had been promised...All of these died in faith without having received the promises, but from a distance they greeted them.

In 1965, two years after his "I Have A Dream" speech, Dr. Martin Luther King revisited

his own words in a sermon at Ebenezer Baptist Church in Atlanta. This is part of what he said:

I must confess to you this morning that since that sweltering August afternoon in 1963, my dream has often turned into a nightmare. I've seen it shattered...as I've walked the streets of Chicago and seen Negroes, young men and women, with a sense of utter hopelessness because they can't find any jobs. And they see life as a long and desolate corridor with no exit signs. And not only Negroes at this point. I've seen my dream shattered because I've been through Appalachia, and I've seen my white brothers along with Negroes living in poverty. And I'm concerned about white poverty as much as I'm concerned about Negro poverty. Yes, the dream has been shattered, and I have had my nightmarish experiences, but I tell you this morning once more than I haven't lost the faith. I still have a dream that one day all of God's children will have food and clothing and material well-being for their bodies, culture and education for their minds, and freedom for their spirits.

So what, then, is faith? It is a firm attitude of heart, mind and thought. It is not to be confused with stubbornness which is infused with tunnel vision and cannot tolerate any shifts in ideas. Instead, faith is infused with an attitude of perseverance—and yes—hope which we shall explore next time. It is indeed a Blind Trust because while we know the destination, we cannot see the road that takes us there. What we can see is what is already obvious leaving no doubt that Someone or Something is behind it all. So we come to the Table this morning with a promise in our hands. That promise requires from us a response. While we shall look more specifically at that response as we journey deeper into Lent, let us leave it today at gratitude. We are God's. We are created by God. We belong to God. We are manifestations of God every bit as much as the trees in the forest. The promise has been sealed by Christ's sacrifice on our behalf. So with the same faith exhibited by Abraham, let us join together to celebrate the sacred meal prepared for us.

Rev. Tom Dunlap, March 5, 2017

