

O God our King, by the resurrection of your Son Jesus Christ on the first day of the week, you conquered sin, put death to flight, and gave us the hope of everlasting life: Redeem all our days by this victory; forgive our sins, banish our fears, make us bold to praise you and to do your will; and steel us to wait for the consummation of your kingdom on the last great Day; through the same Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Before we begin a look at St. Paul's letter to the Corinthians, I want to begin with a little bit of a thought experiment. I think it might help us to grasp at what Paul was seeking to address with the gorgeous text of his we read this morning from his first letter to the Church in Corinth.

Ok. First, I want you to imagine your car. Or a car you'd really like. Or a car you once had. Whatever helps you to vividly imagine a car. I'm using the new Ford Bronco because honestly those look pretty sweet.

Next, imagine opening the door to get in and putting in that first leg to sit. You should probably have your key or fob out by now as you settle in. Fix your seat if you need to, like if your spouse or kids borrowed the car. You can imagine that I almost always have to move the seat back because I am a giant person.

Ok now, imagine turning the key (or pushing the start button I guess). Now, instead of turning over, and having all the accessories come

on...nothing. Go ahead and try again; but, sorry, nothing happened. Go ahead and imagine reaching to the lever, popping the hood, and exiting the car.

Now, much like real life, it's unlikely that you can diagnose your car woes by sight but go ahead and open that imaginary hood. And you find that to your surprise, you *can* absolutely see the problem. Instead of an engine, you see the road. Yeah, you've quite the automotive issue here, my friend: the catastrophic lack of an internal combustion machine. But don't worry! You've still got some options for transportation even with this engineless car. You can lash it to some horses, and they can drag you along to buy that new engine. Or I guess you could convince some friends to push you along. Listen I said you had options...just not *good* options. The car, without an engine, can still be used as a means of conveyance. But it's missing something pretty critical it needs to do its job *well*.

And missing critical pieces for full function...I think that's fundamentally what was going on when St. Paul wrote this letter to the ancient church in Corinth. Situated in a cosmopolitan setting, a Roman city with lots of different nationalities, religions, and philosophies vying for attention, the church in Corinth was kind of unique among her sister churches from around the Mediterranean world. There were probably a higher proportion of affluent believers among the body, at least as compared to other early congregations. The amount of folks in town from the

merchant class would make sure of that. It's also a congregation that seems much more comfortable being in contact with various aspects of local culture. And to Paul's mind, that's likely what has been part of the problem. Early in the text of the letter, Paul seems confounded by the fact that the Corinthians have appeared to have abandoned the original heart of his original message to them: that God was rescuing the world through the person and work of the Crucified Messiah.

And throughout the letter, Paul sought to remind them that faithfulness to that original proclamation is part of what makes the Church, well, the Church. It's certainly part of the engine that was missing. The folks were becoming more enamored with some other teaching. Paul would vaguely refer to whatever those teachings were as 'wisdom.' And though we don't know the actual theological and philosophical contours of that wisdom from Paul's letter, we know the results-because we read that the people in the community were coming apart at the seams. There was dissension and factions were crystallizing, even to the point of developing slogans. There was a fair share of dissolute living that would have scandalized their neighbors. There was a disregard for the needy among the community, and we think they even had some serious issues with appropriate behavior when coming together for worship and fellowship.

Corinth was a mess. Like a dumpster fire mixed with a train wreck sized mess. But just like how God never stopped loving Israel despite their constant turn to idolatry, God consistently showed that He wasn't done with the broken-down chassis of that ancient Church. He kept sending the Holy Spirit to keep them going and to show His power despite the hardness of their hearts towards one another. But, since they were so dysfunctional, they just fought about the gifts that God was sending them. Over the past few weeks, we've heard from the *twelfth* chapter of the letter where Paul was trying to help the Corinthians to recognize that the spiritual gifts were for the edification of the body, and that each member of the body has an important role to play according to the needs of the whole and the overall vocation of the Church. But Paul had intuited that the Corinthians had ceased to seek that most important of all gifts, that which actually makes all the others actually work. He'd figured out that the engine was out of the car because even with all the things God was doing among them, they didn't *love* one another like God loved them. For all the spiritual gifts of angelic tongues, prophecy, and so on, even as incredible as those might seem, Paul reminds us that they amount to nothing without love.

Paul spends almost the whole thirteenth chapter of his letter describing love as that which completes, that which draws us to completion and maturity. The virtues that love produces within us, according to Paul, are virtues that build us into people meant for the long hall. Patience and

kindness are for the long game, the long haul. Arrogance, boastfulness, resentfulness, insistence on one's own way, those things are short game plays and lead Christian hearts to incompleteness. But love, love "...bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never ends."

Love is the engine, my friends. Love is what makes the Church do what it meant to do. Corinth could still do some neat things with its limited measure of the gift of love, but they were ultimately bad options in comparison to what was possible with love as the engine. If that ancient church had hewed closer to Christ's loving design for it, it would not have been in the fix it was in. And Paul wouldn't have had to write so many letters there.

The interesting thing about the thirteenth chapter of this letter, perhaps among St. Paul's most quoted verses, is that just about everything Paul says about love can be said about God. You might even take your bulletin home and try that today and see if you gain insight as you search for God's love in your own life. As for St. John's, I always pray that Christ's love for us and our love for one another is visible in all that we do. If love is truly the engine, we can actually do what Christ designed us for: we can love God with all of our heart, mind, soul, and strength and we can love our neighbors as ourselves. We can magnify Christ to all who would look upon us and we can be his faithful ambassadors to those yet to know him. With love as the engine, we can be a royal priesthood, a holy

nation, set apart to God's work in the world. With love to complete us and keep us, we will not suffer that which broke that old Church in Corinth. With God's gift of love among us, I know we will be a place where the sinner finds refreshment, and where both they and the saint can call on God together as the Psalmist did, to seek comfort.

In the Lord, have we taken refuge; *

let us never be ashamed.

May His righteousness, deliver us and set us free; *

May He incline His ear to us and save us.

To God be all Glory. From age to age. Amen.