

### ***The Greatest Gift***

In the name of Jesus the Son of God, dear friends in Christ: Hollywood has long been bringing comic book heroes to life on the big screen. I expect everyone is familiar with Superman, Batman, Spiderman, Wonder Woman and a number of others. A more recent trend in these films is to put groups of heroes together so that they work as a team to defeat the evil villains. Of course, what all of these fictional characters have in common is that they possess one or more superpowers that enable them to do things the average person can't; superpowers like incredible strength, x-ray vision, the ability to fly, change form, resist fire, read minds, and so on. In preparation for this message I looked at long lists of superpowers and the heroes who supposedly have them – there's hundreds of them, most of which I'd never heard of. In the process I discovered that I have a superpower. Yes, I can spontaneously generate feelings of rage and hatred in other people. I'm not sure it's a particularly helpful superpower, but what are you going to do? You play the hand you're dealt, right? But it got me to thinking: what if you could choose? What if, sort of like he did for young Solomon, the Lord offered to give you a superpower of some kind – anything you desired? What would you choose?

It's not, as I hope to show, an entirely hypothetical question. We know that in the earliest days of the Christian Church the Lord gifted certain individuals with supernatural abilities. The Apostles of Jesus and St. Paul were able to perform miracles of healing – nowhere near on the level that Jesus had done them; but still, they did them from time to time. This gift was given to confirm their message and to reinforce their apostolic authority. Others too were given gifts to a lesser degree; some to speak in languages they had never learned, others to prophesy future events like an upcoming famine or that Paul was going to be arrested and taken into custody, for example. We see these supernatural gifts becoming fewer and farther between as time went on. Once the Church was firmly established and widespread, they weren't needed as much. But especially in that time when the Apostles were still alive and for some period afterward these gifts were not altogether uncommon.

And you'd think that would be a good thing. To be sure, in most places it was. But at the church in Corinth, Paul's perpetual problem child of a congregation, the supernatural abilities granted by the Holy Spirit were like fuel on the blazing fire of all their other troubles. Supernatural gifts of the Spirit (like all the good gifts of God) can be abused. They can be used for evil purposes as well as for good. And that's what was happening at Corinth.

I've mentioned before that the congregation there was divided into warring factions, each claiming its own superiority over the rest. On an individual level too, members of the church were at odds, each one trying to prove that he or she was better than the others: somehow wiser, holier, more spiritual, more pious, more biblically knowledgeable, whatever. And if someone possessed a supernatural spiritual gift, they used it to show off – to prove what an extra-special, superty-duperty Christian they were. "Oooh! Look at me! See what I can do! My gift is better than yours. Must be that God thinks I'm better than you." To make matters worse, even members without supernatural spiritual gifts were pretending to possess them so that they could participate in this game of one-upsmanship too. They did this especially with speaking in tongues and alleged powers of prophecy. Why? Because they're the easiest to fake. If someone stands up and starts spouting a bunch of gobbledy-gook, who's to say they aren't speaking Swahili? Or some unknown heavenly language spoken by angels (as some of them

claimed)? Likewise with prophecy: you could make your “word from the Lord” sufficiently vague or cast it far enough into the future that no one could prove you wrong.

Knowing this, it’s not hard to guess what the people in this congregation were constantly praying for: “Lord, grant me ever more spectacular spiritual gifts – the kind that will impress others the most.”

In last week’s Epistle lesson, we heard St. Paul taking the members of the Corinthian church to task for their unchristian attitudes and fractious behaviors. Using the analogy of a human body with the individual members of the congregation like the parts of the body – eyes, ears, hands, feet, and so on – Paul explained that it how we are to see ourselves: part of an organic whole, united by the one Spirit, each performing our own essential roles for the good of the whole body. We aren’t in competition with each other. We’re on the same side. What’s bad for one is bad for us all. What’s good for one is good for us all. And if in his wisdom the Holy Spirit grants you a gift, talent, or ability – whether natural or supernatural – it’s not so you can puff yourself up with pride and bring glory to yourself; no, it’s so that you can use that gift to serve the needs of the other parts of the body. Each one is to use the gifts that God gives to support and enhance the whole.

With this in mind, Paul then encourages his hearers (and that would include us) to seek the greatest supernatural gift that the Holy Spirit gives, which is love. Without love, he says, the other gifts of the Spirit are useless. The gift of tongues is great; but without love it’s just noise. Powers of prophecy, spiritual insight and wisdom, even the faith to move mountains are nothing without love. The greatest act of charity or the faith to face a martyr’s death by fire, if you use it for personal glory rather than for the sake of love it’s worse than useless. *You* are worse than useless.

Paul then defines this supernatural love that he’s speaking of; and it’s good that he does. We usually use the word “love” to mean romantic emotions or feelings of affection. That isn’t what Paul is talking about at all. No, he means divine love: the kind God has for us, the love that Jesus displayed for us when on the cross he suffered and died for our sins.

This love, Paul says, is patient. A better translation is “long suffering”. It is not quickly or easily aroused to anger. It brushes off insult and abuse. This love is kind. It is favorably disposed to others and always seeks their good.

Having described love’s two most prominent positive features, Paul explains what love is not. It’s not jealous. This was the big problem at Corinth. The members were envious of gifts others had. They weren’t content with their own part in the body. Love doesn’t think or act that way. Love does not boast. The one with love serves without trying to draw attention to self. Love is not arrogant; it’s not filled with conceit but rather with humility. Love is not rude. It is mindful of other’s thoughts and feelings and avoids speech and behaviors that may cause offense. Love does not insist on its own way. It doesn’t need to be in charge. It happily goes along with what’s best for everyone. Love is not irritable. It’s not grouchy or easily provoked by the improper words or actions of others. Love is not resentful. Here I prefer the translation “it keeps no record of wrongs”. Love forgives all offenses and tries to forget them. It never dredges up old hurts and broods on them. It doesn’t bring them up in an argument to remind the offender of what they did. Love does not rejoice at wrongdoing. Sin of any kind in anyone is cause for sorrow. Love rejoices with the truth – and in particular, the truth of Christ that saves.

Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. The first and last features of this last quartet, bearing and enduring, extend the idea of long-suffering patience. The center two, believing and hoping, do not refer to some kind of Pollyanna gullibility – whatever you say, I believe – but rather to firm faith in the Word and promises of God and to our certain hope of eternal life in the recreated heaven and earth.

This supernatural gift of divine love, Paul says, never ends. It's what we'll be doing for all eternity. The other gifts the members at Corinth so coveted had a limited shelf life. They would all pass away in time. Indeed, in our day they are long gone. No one is out there being given new prophecies or performing miracles. Those who want to speak in other languages have to learn them the hard way. But love, the greatest of all the supernatural gifts of the Spirit, is the one that lasts forever.

Paul's point is that you can begin to exercise the gift right now. How? Not by digging deep within yourself and trying real hard, that's for sure. Whatever you achieve that way will be exactly like those who only pretended to have the gifts of tongues or prophecy. It will be fake love, only the surface appearance of it. No, the love we've been discussing is supernatural. It doesn't come from within but rather from the outside. It is given by God. And it is given when first you look inside yourself and see that you don't have it naturally. Run down the list of love's attributes and you'll see: "I am not patient. I am often unkind. I am envious, boastful, arrogant, rude, determined to have my way, irritable, and resentful." Then recognize and confess these things for the sins that they are. Receive again the word of Christ's forgiveness – the forgiveness he achieved for you when he perfectly put divine love on display. And by that word of forgiveness and the power of his Holy Spirit working through his word, he will cleanse your heart and renew your mind to enable you to exercise the greatest and most enduring gift he has to give. May we earnestly seek this gift that the Lord may fill us with it, now and always, through Jesus Christ our Lord. In his holy name. Amen.

***Soli Deo Gloria!***