

I hope to have caught your attention with the title of this sermon. [In fact, when Tracey (my wife) saw the bulletin this morning and read the title of the sermon, she came up to me and said “I just saw the title of your sermon.... a little arrogant, don’t you think?”] It may strike you as a strange title, or maybe an arrogant title. Some of you may be afraid that this sermon may go on for several hours. After all, we have 66 books in the Bible, including some 600 laws in the Old Testament, 4 Gospel accounts of the life of Jesus, several letters from the Apostle Paul to Christian Churches, as well as more letters to other Christians. And don’t forget about the almost 2,000 years of Christian tradition.

Just the other day I got a catalog from a Christian book store offering a 38 volume set of writing by the early Church fathers, each one about the size of a good dictionary. Martin Luther, John Calvin, Karl Barth and countless others have written extensively on the Church and Christianity. There are not one but two libraries at Princeton Theological Seminary dedicated to Christianity.

You might wonder how I intend to cover all that material. After all, Christianity, like any major religion, is a complex system of faith which needs in-depth study and analysis in order to be completely understood. Not long ago I heard a minister talking about a conversation he had while traveling. He boarded a plane and soon after take-off the man sitting next to him asked what he did for a living. “I’m a minister” he replied. “Oh!” the man sitting next to him exclaimed. “I don’t know much about religion, I’m an astronomer myself. But I think it all basically boils down to: do the best you can and try to be a good person.” The minister, being in a particular mood, said “Oh, well, I don’t know much about astronomy, but I think it all boils down to twinkle, twinkle little star, how I wonder what you are?” There was a heavy air of silence for the rest of the trip.

I can understand that minister’s frustration. I have often heard Christianity boiled down to make it little more than a system of good behavior, robbed of any uniqueness and anything which might make it the least bit different than some generic religion that doesn’t really disturb anything or anyone. That’s not Christianity. Christianity is a religion which has changed the world, for good and bad over time, based on the reaction to God becoming human, walking on the earth, and instructing His followers in a new way of understanding themselves and their relationship to God. This man Jesus did not simply appeal to our sense of inner goodness, if that had been the case He would never have upset the community of faith as He did. He certainly would not have upset people so much that they would be driven to crucify him. Jesus did much more than that. Jesus came to fulfill the law of God. That’s the law from Deuteronomy, Leviticus, Exodus, and all the other laws, 613 laws. These laws which Moses instructed the people to keep, and teach to their children, and their children’s children. These laws given to us, given for us, to guide and shape our lives. These laws given to us to give us life, to teach us how to live rightly before God. These laws were to give us life, yet we resist them, we fight against them, we struggle against God’s way and say “No no, I have a better idea. I know a better way.” And so we turn away from God’s plans. And there you have a brief

description of sin. We refuse to obey God, we reject the life that we are offered and choose death over life.

Jesus came to die for our sins. Jesus accepted the requirements of God, He accepted the life that was offered through the law, and He did it. Then He did something remarkable. He had lived-up to all the requirements, but He did not stop there. He wanted more, He wanted us to be able to get back to where we were supposed to be, even though we continue in our stubborn ways. He wanted us to refocus on God's love, on God's love for us, and so He did the unthinkable. He who had accepted life through God's law accepted a punishment for our sins against God. Unthinkable. Incredible. Unbelievable. But true. Jesus came to die for our sins. If you want to boil Jesus down to something, don't boil Him down to just a good guy who wanted to show us a way to nurture our inner self. That was not why He came. While He was here He did indeed teach us a new way to live, and a new way to understand our relationship to God and each other, but if you strip away the fact that Jesus came to die for our sins and be resurrected from the dead, then you are not talking about Jesus. If there was no cross and resurrection then we should all be going to the Temple and preparing to offer sacrifice for our sins.

You may not have ever thought of the law as an expression of God's love. I hope you can begin to think about it that way today. It is hard to understand the Old Testament without understanding that the law of God was not a punishment but a gift. God's immense love for us is hard to comprehend because it is so different than how we usually think of love.

That is where we come to the New Testament passage for today. It's just one verse, but a very important verse. It comes right after Paul's description of love which you have probably heard many times before. If not, take a look at 1 Corinthians 13 sometime. It is a beautiful description of love. If you have ever been to a Christian wedding you have probably heard the verses "love is patient, love is kind, is not rude, is not easily angered, does not keep a record of wrongs, is not proud, does not boast, always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres, and never fails." (1 Cor 13, summarized).

I don't know of another description of love which is so simple, yet so complete. But who is Paul talking about? Us? Is this how we love? If I look back over the past week, how many times was I not patient, was I unkind, was I rude or easily angered? Do I remember when people have done wrong against me? Am I never proud, do I not sometimes boast? Do I always protect, always trust, always hope, always persevere, and never fail? There are days, and weeks, when I do pretty well on some of those. But there are days and weeks when I do poorly on some of those, or many of those. I can try my hardest, set my will that I am going to follow this model of love that Paul has given us, but more often when I read that list of what love is I read it as a list which convicts me of how often I have fallen short. After all, that description is how we are supposed to love all people, not just those who love us. When I compare myself to that standard, I realize I am far short of the mark.

If we see Jesus as just a good example of human potential, what comfort does that bring us when we realize that we fall short of God's law and fall short of the love that Jesus embodied? When

we reduce Jesus to just a moral guide then we forget sin. We forget our sinfulness and that Jesus came to free us from sin's ultimate hold on us. We keep telling ourselves in good American Protestant fashion that if we just work harder we will be good enough. Good enough. That's a strange phrase, isn't it? Good enough. It sounds like an achievement "I'm finally good enough" but at the same time it sounds rather like a concession "Well, that's good enough".

I submit to you that whether or not we are "good enough" is not the question. Measuring ourselves against Paul's description of love should be enough to show us that we are not good enough. I don't mean to be a downer, I just think we're missing the point of Jesus' death on the cross when we try to be "good enough". The point is not what we do, but what God has done. The point is not "are we good enough?" but "are we loved enough?" and the simple, plain answer to that question is yes, we are loved enough. We been loved by a love which is patient, a love which is kind, a love which keeps no record of wrongs done, which does not boast and is not rude, a love which always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres, and never fails. We have been loved by that love. Jesus embodied God's love for us, and in that He was an example for us.

Jesus Himself said to His followers "My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends." (John 15: 12-13). Love each other as I have loved you, how was that? I refer you back again to Paul's description of love. That is the love that loves us before we love God, that loves us not because we are good enough but loves us despite the fact that we are not good enough, or as Paul wrote to the Christians in Rome: "God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us." (Rom 5:8).

And with that death which we remember this Lenten season, we remember the way Jesus loved us. We remember that no matter what we do or what gifts we have they mean nothing without love [which Paul also says in 1 Cor 13]. And we do try to follow Jesus' example, not to earn our way to heaven (as if we could) but out of joy in response to the love that loves us even when we are unlovable, even when we are most stubborn.

"Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength, and love your neighbor as yourself." Matthew, Mark and Luke all record Jesus as repeating that verse from Deuteronomy [Matthew 22: 37; Mark 12: 30; Luke 10: 27]. There is no greater commandment.

You know who Jesus was, you know why Jesus came, and you know what Jesus left for us to do -- And that's all you need to know about being a Christian. Go out from this place and live in remembrance of that love.