

Show of hands. Who else here felt like they were at a wedding while listening to our second reading? I know I had the strong urge to get up and say, “I now pronounce you husband and wife.” Father Jacek has probably heard that reading a hundred times or more. It’s the most popular scripture selection chosen by engaged couples for their weddings. I’m no exception. It was the second reading when I got married. It makes sense. The words sound appropriate for such a setting. They’re like a beautiful piece of poetry, a hymn to the glories of human love.

But here’s an interesting tidbit of information. Saint Paul isn’t actually talking about romantic love in this passage. If you remember last Sunday’s second reading, he was writing to the church in Corinth about being one Body in Christ even though each individual member had different gifts and talents. Today’s second reading is the verses immediately following those in the Bible. He’s giving instructions to the Corinthians as to how to live together as members of the Body of Christ. Unfortunately, he was forced to point out some of the difficulties that plagued the Corinthian church – intolerance and impatience, jealousy and rivalry, rudeness and a lack of consideration of others, refusal to deal with immorality and scandal. These sins and shortcomings were eroding the shared union of believers there.

Saint Paul’s solution to the problem was love. Not just any type of love but a love that is the meaning of life, the highest gift, and the greatest of virtues; which is Christ-like love. We’re called to love one other like Christ loves us. Saint Paul goes on to describe for the Corinthians, and us, what that enduring love looks like by listing the fourteen great characteristics we heard today.

What’s most striking about his description though is how different it is from the idea of love that’s popular in our culture. Our culture often devalues, even debases the meaning of love. For the world we live in, love is a passive thing. It’s a feeling that sweeps us off our feet and

takes control of our lives. We just stand still while the feeling comes over us. For Saint Paul, and for Jesus, love is more than a feeling. Sometimes nice feelings go along with it. Sometimes they don't. Think of a mother taking care of her sick child. She stays up all night. She watches. She worries. She cleans and feeds and comforts. She exhausts herself. She feels rotten in the midst of all of it. And yet, she wouldn't have it another way. Feelings have nothing to do with it.

Christ-like love, real love, the kind of love that lasts and gives meaning to life, isn't self-centered, but other-centered. It isn't a passive feeling. Authentic love is active self-giving of ourselves to God and others; which leads to patience, kindness, forgiveness, courage, and so forth.

This love that Saint Paul envisioned can only be understood in light of today's Gospel. We hear quite the turn of events and the start of Jesus' rejection. In the beginning of the story, people were amazed at the gracious words that came out of Jesus' mouth. They even spoke highly of Him. By the end of the story, the people were trying to hurl Him down a cliff. That's quite the turnaround. What happened? Jesus made them uncomfortable.

Jesus was preaching to Jewish people who knew they were God's Chosen People. Jesus then talked about the prophets Elijah and Elisha going outside the Chosen People to pagans to work the wonders of God. This wasn't pleasant for them to hear. Jesus had gone beyond what they were comfortable hearing. He challenged their ideas and convictions. The people wanted punishment and justice for the outsiders. They didn't want the pagans to receive mercy.

When we look at our broken world, oftentimes, we too want punishment and justice for evildoers. We rarely look at them and pray for forgiveness, for them to come back to God, for grace to be given to them. We tend to want mercy for ourselves when we fall short, but not for others. We hold others to a higher standard than we hold ourselves.

It's easy to love the people that love us back. What about the people in our lives that have insulted us, hurt us, or who we can't stand? It's uncomfortable to hear that we're supposed to love these people. We don't even like them. Jesus never said that we had to like everyone. He said we had love everyone. There's a big difference and it doesn't mean that we condone their actions or sins. It means we love the person like Jesus loves us.

It seems like a daunting task to live up to the beautiful ideal that Saint Paul and Jesus sets before us. It's beyond our own power to love as Christ loves. We can't do it by ourselves. But that doesn't mean that we give up hope. Christ Himself can strengthen our weak love with his unconquerable love. That's why He came and died on the cross for us. That's why He keeps coming in the Eucharist at every Mass, and in the sacrament of Reconciliation in every confessional. Loving Christ's way starts on the inside. We must open our own hearts to Christ's love and let it fill our hearts. Then that love will overflow from us, through us, to others.

God has planted His grace in our souls. He wants us to learn to love as He loves. His grace makes it possible to do so. All we need to do is tend that seed of grace, like good gardeners, and He will take care of the rest. We should water that seed every day by healthy, heartfelt prayer. We should feed it with the fertilizer and sunlight of the Eucharist. We should keep pulling the weeds that try to stifle it by frequent confession. We should prune it and support it with concrete acts of self-denial and service to others, especially when we don't feel like it. The test of true love is when it must be lived in the most disagreeable of moments and circumstances.

Jesus wants us to live life to the full. So He invites us out of our comfort zones. He invites us to move forward, to grow, to push ourselves, to become better Christians, better human

beings, better ambassadors of Christ's kingdom. St. Therese of Lisieux once wrote, "If we don't find Christ-like love around us, then we should put it there."

The devil, the society around us, and the tendencies within us draw us constantly towards selfishness. If we look at our lives honestly and see that we're not growing in our capacity to love as Christ loves, it's not because Christ isn't doing His part. It's because we aren't doing our part. We can measure our success as Christians not by how comfortable our faith is making us, but by how uncomfortable it's making us.

And a good exercise to help us in becoming more Christ-like is to substitute our own name in place of love in our second reading today. Am I patient or impatient? Quick-tempered? Am I kind or unkind? Am I rude? Am I jealous or happy for those who are blessed in a way I am not? Am I pompous and inflated or humble and self-effacing? Do I just look out for Number One or do I care what happens to others? Do I brood over what others have done to me or do I forgive them? Do I take pleasure when something terrible happens to someone I don't like? Do I show true love when required, a love that may be uncomfortable or disagreeable for myself or others?