

YOU'VE CHANGED

Psalm 71:1-9 I Corinthians 13:1-13

January 31, 2010 J. S. O'Neill

Psalm 71:1-9 *In you, O LORD, I take refuge; let me never be put to shame. ² In your righteousness deliver me and rescue me; incline your ear to me and save me. ³ Be to me a rock of refuge, a strong fortress,¹ to save me, for you are my rock and my fortress. ⁴ Rescue me, O God, from the hand of the wicked, from the grasp of the unjust and cruel. ⁵ For you, O Lord, are my hope, my trust, O LORD, from my youth. ⁶ Upon you I have leaned from my birth; it was you who took me from my mother's womb. My praise is continually of you. ⁷ I have been like a portent to many, but you are my strong refuge. ⁸ My mouth is filled with your praise, and with your glory all day long. ⁹ Do not cast me off in the time of old age; do not forsake me when my strength is spent.*

1 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. ² 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. ³ If I give away all my possessions, and if I hand over my body so that I may boast,¹ but do not have love, I gain nothing. ⁴ Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant ⁵ or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; ⁶ it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. ⁷ It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. ⁸ 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. ⁹ For we know only in part, and we prophesy only in part; ¹⁰ but when the complete comes, the partial will come to an end. ¹¹ 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. ¹² For now we see in a mirror, dimly,¹ 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. ¹³ And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love.*

Chapter thirteen of Paul's first letter to the Corinthians likely has a place on everyone's Top Ten Favorite Bible Passages. Elegantly written, beautifully expressed, this near poem is a blessing and an inspiration.

It's the rare wedding that the bride and groom do not request this passage be read during the ceremony. It's an entirely appropriate piece to include in a wedding, of course, but perhaps not for the reasons most couples assume. The love Paul so beautifully describes has nothing to do with romance, or passion, or even affection. It is neither erotic nor seductive, nor is this love a matter of feeling at all.

The love of which Paul writes is that to which the Greek word *agape* refers. This is a word nearly unique to the New Testament and whose meaning is perhaps best expressed by the sacrifice of Christ upon the cross. This is a love which expends itself for the sake of others no matter what the

cost and forgives no matter what the wound. This is the love which wrests hope out of despair, and which pierces darkness with light. This is a love which is soul-sized – far larger than our need, greater than our faults, and inexhaustible in its power to bring what is new and blessed to whatever is damaged, worn, and exhausted. The love of God for us is what this passage is about. Think of it as a reflection on Jesus' words to his disciples, "Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another."

But there are other dimensions in this passage to explore beyond this word. It took me years of reading and living to realize that though love is a dominant theme of the passage, it is really about life's limits and how we suffer in them. Our ability to understand a Bible passage has a great deal to do with the assumptions and prejudices we bring to it. Paul calls attention to a key limitation we all share when he writes, "When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child." We, of course, change as we age. As an idealistic youth, I read I Corinthians 13 differently than I do now. Back then, I was certain, along with a popular love song of the day that what the world needs now is love, sweet love, that it's the only thing that there's just too little of.

It's not that I now disagree with the sentiment but rather that I no longer have the faith that I or any human being has sufficient love, faith, and hope to recreate the world in our minds' pleasant images, and that even if we could, being the flawed creatures we are, we would recreate the world as a kingdom of self-centeredness. I have learned as I have grown older that my ability to love is flawed, that forgiveness is nearly impossible for me sometimes and is a strength I must daily pray for, that what I like to call kindness may look to others more like manipulation, and what I call hope is a perception of what I want to happen that I believe would be good for me, but not necessarily for you, and that my vision of such a future may well be unrecognizable as the fulfillment of God's promises of peace and goodness. I have learned that I am both incapable and unworthy of being anyone's savior, that my patience has real limits, and that as long as I and everyone else in the world claim the right to define what is good and what is evil, what is true and what is false, there will be conflict, and pain, and disappointment.

I have come to acknowledge that though I thought I always knew what I was doing and where I was going, what I am doing and where I am doing it is a complete surprise. And, in reflection, I realize the blessings I have enjoyed have often been narrow escapes from the blessings I craved, and the pains I have suffered have often been self-inflicted.

In short, I have come to a new understanding of what I Corinthians 13 is all about, having reached that point in life where I realize not every dream is going to be realized, not every strength I have relied upon will remain potent and vital in me, and the people I have known and loved and depended upon will not always be part of my life.

By the same token I have realized that many of my deepest fears have not come true. So many of them, once terrifying in their possibilities, have evaporated in the passing of time. Each day brings some subtle realignment of

the world's destiny, and we are too fraught with the dreams, hopes, anxieties and fears of yesterday to detect them. More people choose, act, and decide out of painful memory than lively hope, and if not actively resistant to the new day God is recreating in our midst, we are desperately slow in responding to it.

We are always – as Paul puts it – seeing as though in a mirror, dimly, but pretending we know and see clearly. In doing so we make self-fulfilling prophecies and fix our fears and prejudices in spiritual concrete. In the arena of the world's politics it's consternating to imagine how differently we might have perceived our enemies had we not kept their teeth sharpened with our fears. In our personal relationships one wonders how perceptively slight might have been the gap between friendship gained and relationship lost. In the routine course of our days I wonder what decisions tending in a slightly altered direction might have kept us from being “envious, boastful, or rude,” would have kept us from “rejoic(ing) in wrongdoing” rather than seeking the truth at any cost, and would have strengthened us to “endure all things” and allow time for the mechanisms of justice and peace to mesh for the blessing of the world.

It is hard for us to confess our limits, to admit that we don't know, that we don't understand ourselves or the people around us or the times in which we live. It is hard for us to give up our illusions. Perversely, we would rather be right than be at peace. We would rather save face than save soul.

When Paul uses the image of seeing dimly as though in a mirror, be impressed with the degree of dimness he speaks of. He was writing two thousand years ago when a mirror was a polished copper plate, not the sparkling glass we know. This is the dimness – our severely limited ability to see clearly, our captivity to our pasts, our fixedness in attitude, our anxiety to always prove we are competent and capable in spite of our limitedness.

Thus, how many of us never emerge into maturity because of our fears or those of our parents? How many husbands or wives are never freed to be persons because in their partner's eyes they are captive to a role? How much more pain do we add to one another's lives because we have no vision that transcends our habit-formed attitudes toward one another? By projecting our fears and hostilities upon the world, we give birth to nightmares.

That which would enable us to sacrifice our fears as tomorrow's possibilities and replace them with a vision of God's promises coming true is the love which “bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.” This love is God's good gift, enabling us not only to survive the changes and conflicts, surprises and perplexities of life, but also helping us come to terms with having to live within the limitations of our knowledge and understanding.

As far as any particular moment is concerned, “We know only in part... We see in a mirror, dimly.” Yet, although we are groping in the fog, God – whose love for us is unlimited and unfettered – sees us clearly. The distinguishing character of a Christian is not her sense of always being right but of always being loved by the God whose recreating power still works in us to reshape the world into the shape of a cross. It is God's clear vision we are called to act upon, not our clouded one. That is why we must forgive, because

it is God's vision of life, not our own. That is why we must hope, because it is God who sees clearly, not we. That is why we must love, because it is the means by which peace and justice overcome chaos and fear.

How often have we justified some gross violation by describing it as just "human nature?" At such times we are staring into our dim mirrors which show us merely a distorted view rearward. How often we have wounded one another with harsh judgments, cutting words, broken promises? At such times we perceive only our own reflections, not God's perspective from the cross. It is hard for us: as followers of Jesus we strive to live as people before their time. Like an engagement, where the promise of a union yet to be forged commits two persons to ways of being present to one another, like an athlete leading a disciplined life years before the Olympic event, Christians are called to live like citizens of God's kingdom long before it is fully established for they know the arrival is inevitable and can only be hastened by their faithfulness.

In the last scene of Archibald MacLeish's play, "J.B.", a modern setting of the story of Job, a character chants,

Blow on the coal of the heart.
The candles in churches are out.
The lights have gone out in the sky.
Blow on the coal of the heart
And we'll see by and by...

MacLeish says the candles in the churches and the lights in the sky are out because he believes God has abdicated the throne of grace. Only we are left. Only our hearts have any modicum of light or heat left, and our hope rest in our ability to revive them into an ember of hope.

That is not how our faith sees it. The hard reality of daily living may be clouded in our eyes. The vision of God so loving the world that God's son lived among us full of grace and truth should be as clear as sunshine. What the body fails to see, the soul sees in hope.

So how shall we be? Shall we act as though God has moved on without us, leaving us huddled about faint embers of remembered promise without a clue as to where tomorrow's fuel will come from? Are we mere victims of an ever-tightening circle of ignorance and desperation? Or, is there reliable news about our future that we can live by? Are there promises which, though not yet fulfilled, yet can shape the way we live?

Indeed, there are. Our faith demands of each of us a holy imagination that trusts a love that will go to any length to forgive, that will transcend any boundary to reconcile, and will bring to completeness all that is partial, temporary, and dim. On a clear spiritual day, we can see eternity, if the promises of God have been heard, and have been trusted.