

The last two weeks, we have been talking about the gifts that God has given us and the necessity to use these gifts well. Specifically, Saint Paul has been giving us lessons about this in the second reading. Saint Paul continues today and he gives us the most important lesson of all concerning our gifts.

First he says, “Strive eagerly for the greatest spiritual gifts.” So think of all the great spiritual gifts: maybe prophecy, or even healing. Imagine how great it would be to have the gifts of healing, or even the gifts of Miracles – raise people from the dead like Jesus did. Saint Paul says ok, strive for these gifts; if it be God’s will, maybe they would be granted. As great as it would be to have these gifts, Saint Paul is saying, I will show you an even greater thing.

If even you have the greatest of all the gifts - if you could speak even with the tongue of an angel, if you had the gift of prophecy and knew the answer to all mysteries, if you had the faith to move mountains, if you had all these unbelievable gifts - but did not have love, you would have nothing and you would be nothing. Of all the great gifts, the greatest gift is love. This is a gift that God wants to give to all.

The story of Saint Therese, the Little Flower, demonstrates this reality. You might remember that Saint Therese struggled to find her place in the Church. She said, “When I looked upon the mystical body of the Church, I recognized myself in none of the members which Saint Paul described.” She had a burning desire to be a priest, and a martyr, and a Doctor of the Church, and a crusader, and a prophet and a missionary. But she knew she would not be all these things, and that distressed her greatly until she pondered this very passage of Saint Paul that we heard today. It then struck her, her place in the Church. She said, “I knew that the Church has a heart, that this heart burns with love, and that it is love alone which gives life to its members. I knew that if this love were extinguished, the Apostles would no longer preach the Gospel, and the martyrs would refuse to shed their blood. I understood that love embraces all vocations... I have found my place in the bosom of the Church... in the heart of the Church, my Mother, I will be love!”

Love, as Saint Paul teaches us and as Saint Therese so profoundly lived out, is the greatest of the gifts and the greatest vocation. We must remember that love isn’t merely a feeling, although good feelings sometimes accompany love, love is a gift, a choice, and action. Sometimes it comes easy, most times, true love requires self-denial. You can just look at Saint Paul’s description about love to see that it is not just about feelings:

Love is patient
Love is kind
It is not jealous, it is not pompous, it is not rude
It is not quick-tempered
It does not brood over injury.

As we see, we have to work at love and we need a lot of God’s grace to grow in love. But love is the greatest gift and the greatest vocation, and we are all called to live it and to grow in it, so that we should say in our own way, with Saint Therese, in the heart of my marriage, in the heart of my priesthood, in family, in the heart of the church, I will be love.

Given by Father Mark Gurtner at Our Lady of Good Hope Catholic Church, Fort Wayne, Indiana, on the 4th Sunday of Ordinary Time, 2016.