

STS. PETER AND PAUL, 2013

Of all the passages written by St. Paul, perhaps the most-loved, the one so frequently proclaimed at weddings, is his praise of love in the thirteenth chapter of First Corinthians, where he says that love is patient and kind, not rude and not quick-tempered. If this were all that characterizes love, one might conclude that the greatest saints—like the two we celebrate today—were surely never given to sharp retorts or harsh judgments. How wrong that would be! In one of the most hard-hitting parts of Paul's letter to the Galatians, he describes one of the few times he was ever in the company of his fellow apostle Peter, and we can only view it as a time when sparks flew. From a meeting that Paul had had somewhat earlier in Jerusalem with the leaders of the early Church, it had become clear to all present at that time—including Peter, Paul, and Paul's companion Barnabas—that Gentile and Jewish believers could and should share table fellowship. When Peter afterward came to Antioch, where Paul and Barnabas were already residing, he did indeed at first take his meals with Gentiles, but then some strict Jewish Christians arrived from Jerusalem and frowned on this practice, leading Peter to draw back.

What happened next Paul describes in very forthright language: "When [these people] came, he began to draw back and separate himself, because he was afraid of the circumcised. And the rest of the Jews also acted hypocritically along with him, with the result that even Barnabas was carried away by their hypocrisy. But when I saw that they were not on the right road in line with the truth of the gospel, I said to Cephas in front of all, 'If you, though a Jew, are living like a Gentile and not like a Jew, how can you compel the Gentiles to live like Jews?'"

(Gal 2:12-14). It clearly took courage for Paul to act like this, but he knew that there are things far more important than avoiding conflict just to maintain harmonious relations. He was practicing what we sometimes call “tough love,” even as Jesus himself often did in his confrontations with Pharisees when he found them guilty of hypocrisy, even going so far as to call them “whitened sepulchers” and “blind leaders of the blind.”

My reason for noting these things is twofold: first, so that we might have a truer, deeper understanding of what love might require in a given instance, and second, to lead into a further consideration of ways in which Paul was very like his Lord Jesus Christ. Perhaps the most striking instance of the parallel may be found in looking at two other well-known passages in Paul’s writings. The first is almost certainly not original with him but rather is his insertion of an early Christian hymn into his letter to the Philippians. You will recall that the hymn begins with a statement of Christ’s possession of a privileged status or right: “he was in the form of God.” Immediately the passage goes on to say that he did not cling to or exercise this right but rather refused to regard his equality with God as something to be grasped or exploited. The hymn then concludes by referring to the way Jesus emptied or lowered himself to the state of a slave, becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.

Now it is noteworthy that this very same threefold movement from possession of a privilege to a decision not to exercise it, and from there to a slave-like status can be found in Paul’s own life. The best example, as pointed out by one of our country’s leading Pauline scholars, is to be found in the ninth chapter of First Corinthians.¹ In Paul’s Mediterranean culture, it was expected that any genuine teacher would be provided with all the necessities of life in gratitude for the teaching he provided. Paul was fully aware that such a right was his, for

he says: “My defense against those who would pass judgment on me is this: Do we not have the right to our food and drink? ... Or is it only Barnabas and I who have no right to refrain from working for a living? ... The Lord commanded that those who proclaim the gospel should get their living by the gospel.” But just as Christ did not cling to his rights or privileges, neither will Paul, who goes on to write: “I have made no use of any of these rights, nor am I writing this so that they may be applied in my case.... What then is my reward? Just this: that in my proclamation I may offer the gospel free of charge, so as not to make full use of my rights in the gospel.” And finally, just as Christ took the form of a slave, Paul writes of himself: “We endure everything so as not to place an obstacle to the gospel of Christ.... I made myself a slave to all, that I might win more of them.”

When, then, Paul elsewhere urges his readers to be imitators of him just as he was an imitator of Christ, this is the sort of thing he means. Such imitation is not a matter of copying some external model, but rather of putting on the mind of Christ and allowing that to guide one’s conduct in whatever situation one finds oneself. At times this will call for the kind of harsh statement that we found Paul addressing to his fellow apostle Peter, or Jesus lambasting the self-righteous of his day. At other times it will call for words of great kindness and compassion, as when Paul, in his very first letter, tells the Thessalonians: “Although we were able to impose our weight as apostles of Christ, instead we were gentle among you, as a nursing mother cares for her children” (1 Thess 2:7), or when Jesus gently admonishes the woman caught in adultery. At still other times it will mean facing severe, even violent, opposition without losing one’s trust in God, as seen in the way Paul dealt with so many scourgings, stonings, imprisonments, and shipwrecks, or in the way Jesus went to his death, praying that his persecutors be forgiven, “for they know not what they do.” There is no single, one-size-fits-all formula for genuine

discipleship, but whoever is open to the guidance of the Holy Spirit, whom Paul calls the “first installment” of our future glory (2 Cor. 1:22), will know just what to say or do in even the very difficult situations that led Peter and Paul to martyrdom in Rome. As we celebrate their feast, may these two great saints inspire us to ever greater love of God and one another.

¹ Michael J. Gorman, *Apostle of the Crucified Lord: A Theological Introduction to Paul and His Letters* (Grand Rapids, MI and Cambridge, U.K.: Eerdmans, 2004), 68-69.