

## Quinquagesima (MP-2) (2020)

A few days before Dr. Martin Luther King was to preach, he ran into a friend who asked him what he planned to say.

“I don’t know,” said Dr. King, “all my preacher friends say they just get up there and leave it to the Spirit. So, I am going to try that.”

Several days later the two men’s paths crossed again, and the first words out of the friend’s mouth was: “Well, how did it go?”

“Not so well,” said Dr. King. “All I could hear the Spirit say was:

**“Martin, you should have prepared. “Martin, you should have prepared.”**

Preparation is important in sermons, as well as in most other endeavours of life.

It is the reason why we have the little season of Pre-Lent, which we conclude today.

This season is made up of three Sundays that go by exotic names only dyed-in-the-wool Anglicans can pronounce: **Septuagesima, Sexagesima and Quinquagesima.**

Why do we have these three Sundays? Well, they are there to help us to prepare to keep a holy and profitable Lent.

Lent, as I am sure you know, is a season in which we begin to make our way with Jesus and the disciples to the cross.

A season in which many ‘give up’ something . . . make sacrifices for the sake of the Gospel . . . seek to get serious about their Christian faith.

It is a time to train for service in Christ’s army . . . to bring our bodies in line with the Spirit . . . to get rid of the garbage in our lives.

All that is well and good, nevertheless, a warning is in order. Here it is:

It is possible to go through the motions . . . to give up watching TV . . . to do without chocolates and sugar in our coffee . . . to read the Bible . . . to attend extra services of worship . . . *but without profit.*

How so?

Today's collect tells us. Here we are reminded that "all our doings without charity [or love] are nothing worth."

And, this pronouncement is certainly borne out in Scripture.

Without love, acts of piety are worthless and can even be dangerous. Think about the Pharisees told about in the Gospels.

No, if we are to get Lent right, if this season is to be one of real growth, we must "get on the love bandwagon."

But what is love?

I know it usually not a good idea to define something in the negative . . . to begin with what it is not. But that is exactly what I am going to do.

Love is not a feeling . . . at least no primarily.

That may come as something of a surprise seeing as we have just celebrated Valentine's, a day given over almost exclusively to feeling and feelings.

Nevertheless, Christian love is more. It has a different centre and way of doing business.

If love is not a feeling, what is it?

The definition I like and commend to you is this:

**Love is desiring and working for the good of the other.**

It is a decision and an action . . . though sure feeling is not excluded.

More than that, love is something that is done in response to what God has done for us.

**“If God so loved us, we ought also to love one another,”** we read in 1 John 4:11.

Today’s readings also speak of this essential Christian virtue.

In both we are reminded that love is two-pronged affair. There is love for God and love for neighbour.

This morning I want to focus primary on the latter – love for neighbour – though in actuality these two cannot be split apart.

We might say Christian love is cross shaped.

We reach up to God in response to His downward love for us. Our response includes adoration, worship and most significantly obedience.

**“He that hath my commandments, and keepeth them, he it is that loveth me,”** we hear Jesus say in John 14:21. ///

At the same time, Christian love involves reaching out to those around us, our fellow human beings. As I have just said, desiring and seeking their highest good . . . *even* if we don’t particularly like them.

Pause here, and think of someone in your own life like that. Resolve to love that one just the same . . . to desire and work for his or her highest good.

But, how wide do we draw the circle?

Well, certainly we must begin with members of our own family and our fellow Christians. As I am sure you know, these at times are some of the hardest folks to love.

But that is just the beginning and springboard. Remember Jesus’ parable of the Good Samaritan in which neighbour is defined as *anyone in need*.

Indeed, our Old Testament reading this morning contains the same thought. In verse 19, we read:

**“Love ye therefore the stranger: for ye were strangers in the land of Egypt.”**

As in the Parable of the Good Samaritan, love includes those within your tribe, but it extends beyond them.

But there is just one problem. That problem is that such love is likely to be messy . . . inconvenient . . . costly . . . and uncomfortable.

Let me give you an example of such love in action.

I received a telephone call this past week from a former neighbour and member of this church. The couple now lives in Tampa, even though their heart is still very much here in Blue Ridge and at St. Luke’s.

Be that as it may, last Sunday was the date of the wife’s annual family reunion. It is a big Sicilian affair held each year at a park near Tampa.

Well, the day began well. They arrived at the venue early before anyone else had gotten there and began carrying items from the car to where the food would be served.

As they did, the husband tripped and rolled down an embankment. She raced to see if he was all right.

When she reached him, his face and other parts of his body were covered with blood. She looked up for help.

As it turned out at the site next to theirs was a group of owl watchers and their array of big cars and caravans. They all stood staring in their direction, but not one person came over to help.

In telling me the story, the wife said she can still see those eyes.

Then, she saw and felt a black arm reaching down in the direction of her husband.

Unbeknownst to her, a jogger had been going by when her husband went down.

He immediately took charge of the situation. He got her husband up and to the car, checked and cleaned his wounds, which, thankfully turned out to be rather superficial.

When the crisis was passed, they learned that this stranger was a native of an African nation. He was also a Christian and took following Jesus seriously. To finish the story, he came back twice to check on them.

On his last visit, when they turn around to thank him, he was nowhere to be found.

An angel or a man? /// It doesn't matter. He was sent by God.

Who showed love that day?

The owl watchers or the African man?

You know the answer as well as I.

Lent beings Wednesday. Let's prepare.

And what better way to prepare than to get on the love bandwagon with the Good Samaritan, the African man and most importantly with Jesus who so love us that He went all the way to the cross on our behalf.