

### 30 January 2022—The Fourth Sunday after The Epiphany 4: I Corinthians 13 1-13

There is a difference between child-like and childish. In Matthew 18 Jesus says: *...unless you turn and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven* (v. 3). The Greek word simply means “young child”. In today’s Epistle, Paul uses a different word, also translated “child.” This word has the negative meaning of childishness. Paul writes: *When I was a child, I spoke like a child, thought like a child, reasoned like a child; when I became an adult, I put an end to childish ways* (13:11). Childishness is marked by petulance, selfishness and tantrums. Childishness distorts love because the childish cannot accept reality, prefer their fantasies of how the world ought to be, with themselves at the center. Childish people either withdraw, or attempt through manipulation, control, or intimidation to make their make-believe into reality, no matter the consequences. With the *childlike*, imagination is a help in coping with life. Children and the child-like know that make-believe is a nice place to visit but is not reality.

Paul writes of what living in and practicing God’s love with child-like devotion looks like. In the first three verses Paul compares love to other human traits and spiritual gifts: speech, whether human or divine; the gifts of prophecy, insight, and intellect; working miracles, self-sacrifice, even martyrdom; Love is superior to them all. Paul then outlines seven virtues of love and nine marks of stunted love. Love is serenely persistent, benevolent, delights in the truth; love bears, believes, hopes and endures in every circumstance. Childish love is covetous, self-important, egotistical, and offensive; controlling, touchy, holds grudges and happily wounds. Paul contrasts genuine love and corrupted love, child-like love and childish, ego-driven, fraudulent love.

The sham-love Paul describes serves the fake-reality of the childish. Authentic, child-like love does not make fantasy real but makes reality real because we can only love what is real; we cannot truly love illusion. The child-like accepts reality for what it is, even if she/he wishes it were not the way it is. Child-like love chooses truth over the false comfort of fantasy. Such love, built on faith, lives life on life’s terms even when it seems unbearable. For the child-like faith, hope and love are not solutions to life but reliant trust in God despite life’s problems, challenges and failures. The childish are unable or disinterested in being in genuine relationship with God and others. Childish people resist spiritual progress because spiritual progress requires letting go of the ego’s favorite props: selfishness, retaliation and entitlement.

We are made for relationship because God cannot, as it were, be contained within His own complete Being of eternal love but bursts out in joy—filled with yearning for relationship with all humanity, hungering for His own complete love to be accepted. Just as children want attention, affirmation and affection from parents in stable relationships, so the child-like long for and take the actions to receive the presence, encouragement and love of God. Therefore, the child-like are receptive, teachable, unpretentious and persevering. The child-like are genuine, honest and trusting. The child-like want to be known by God, and so confess their sins readily, assured of mercy and forgiveness. They are humble and compassionate for they know: *...now, we see in a mirror, dimly, 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* (13:12). The childish erect barriers behind which they hide from God, others, and themselves. The more childish the more one dwells in the cramped, self-obsessed, fairy-tale world in which there is no room for God or others except as props to serve delusions of self-importance.

*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* (13:11). Paul teaches us the way of love. As we love with child-like love, we enter more deeply God’s eternal love. The way of love is not easy; it is full of challenges; we will stumble. It does not matter so long as we get up and, with God’s help, walk the path of God’s love again. We never journey alone, we have one another; God is with us and, so too, all the angels and saints, to help us, guide us, pray for us. We need only be child-like, asking God to remove all childishness. It will take lots of practice: day-by-day, moment-by-moment; our goal that of being a loving follower of Jesus Christ in every environment, through every relationship. Desire, receive and grow in Christ’s love, share His love graciously with everyone; grow up, mature and be child-like.

Blessing and honor, thanksgiving and praise, more than we can offer, more than we can conceive, be yours, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, by all angels, all mortals, all creatures, now and forever. Amen.