

Mist
January 30, 2022
4th Sunday after Epiphany

It was cold and misty on Thursday night. It was one of those nights that reminds one of the wise words of James, who said: "Your life is a mist" (James 4:14). I was coming home from work--very tired and not very well. At the bus stop, I noticed a disturbance out of the corner of my eye. A woman about my mother's age was struggling to help a man my father's age sit down on a bench. The tall, physically strong man seemed to be a widower, possibly dealing with some dementia and very intoxicated. The poor woman struggled to help him. I offered to call her a cab, but since the bus was coming, she declined. She let me help her get the man onto the bus, the very bus I was waiting for. He was quite polite. Now and then they slipped into an Eastern European language. Now and then he sang. She explained to me during the bus ride that she had been his friend for decades. She had come across town at that late hour to help him get home. When we got off the bus and started to walk arm in arm, he lost his balance and almost pitched both of us into oncoming traffic. Thankfully, he did not fall hard or all the way, and I managed to get him upright again. With a beautiful smile, he thanked me. "It's a beautiful night, isn't it?" I said, trying to keep him calm, happy, straight and manageable. He asked me about our

neighborhood. "The trees are beautiful!" I said, not knowing what to say. And then suddenly we both started laughing uncontrollably. One completely sober, the other completely not sober--arm in arm, walking in the mist like old friends.

The thirteenth chapter of 1 Corinthians has no equal in ancient literature. It is here that the apostle Paul soars on the wings of the Holy Spirit to teach the one needful thing to humanity, the heart of the gospel, the one thing Jesus taught as he lived and as he died on the cross. The chapter tells us what will cease: "Love never ends. As for prophecies, they will pass away; as for tongues, they will cease; as for knowledge, it will pass away. For we know in part and we prophesy in part, but when the perfect comes, the partial will pass away. When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I gave up childish ways. For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I have been fully known." (1 Corinthians 13:8-11). In other words, the kind of things that ancient and modern Christians prided and pride themselves on are but temporary and incomplete things. They may be good things, but they were and are meant to be signs to the greatest sign. Reason and maturity deepen as we seek what is eternal, what will not cease, what pertains to the real

epiphany, the final face to face vision of God: "For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I have been fully known. So now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; but the greatest of these is love." (1 Corinthians 13:12-13). Great books have been written about love, two of them directly inspired by the subject of our reading today: *The Love Chapter* by St. John Chrysostom, and *Works of Love* by Søren Kierkegaard. I want to share today a few insights from these great books ancient and modern.

John Chrysostom is one of the most interesting voices of Byzantium. He suffered exile, harassment, and yet never hesitated to call out the imperial court for its injustices. In his homilies on the Gospel of John, he concludes nearly every sermon with a reference to the poor. In his sermons on 1 Corinthians 13, which have been collected under the title *The Love Chapter* (Brewster, MA: Paraclete Press, 2010), Chrysostom speaks of the way that love transforms our lives by ordering our virtues and overcoming our vices. Most of us are familiar with wanting to conquer a bad habit, a sin, a vice—but perhaps we do not give much thought to ordering our virtues. In Chrysostom's mind, growth in a particular virtue can lead to pride or to the neglect of other virtues. It is love that brings things back into proportion (60-61). For Chrysostom, love changes the landscape of our existence as

well as our ourselves; pilgrim and road both change: “Paul even calls being in prison a free gift, saying, ‘For he has graciously granted you the privilege not only of believing in Christ, but of suffering for him as well’ (Phil. 1:29). And so, while in prison, Paul lives in the present. He tells his hearers that it is a great thing not to be ashamed of the cross. When one is introduced to a new place, even a palace, before he sees the vestibule does he feel compelled to remain standing outside and survey the interior from a distance? If he does it that way, the glory of the palace will not even seem admirable unless he enters and acquaints himself with all of it...For love is a great teacher, and able to withdraw people from their errors, and to reform their character, and to lead them by the hand into self-denial, and out of stones to make men” (60). Most importantly, Chrysostom agrees with Kierkegaard that love is the one needful thing of the Christian faith: “Paul says that the love we are speaking of is the mother of all good things, and it is preferred even to miracles and all other gifts. For where there are vests and sandals of gold, we also expect some other garments to help distinguish the presence of a king. But if we see the purple and the diadem, we don’t need to see any other sign of royalty. Here also, when the diadem of love is on our head, it is enough, on its own, to point out the genuine disciple of Christ—not to ourselves only, but also to unbelievers. As Christ says, ‘By

this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another' (Jn. 13:35). This sign is greater than all other signs—so much so, that the true disciple is recognized by it...It would be better for them to do no signs or wonders at all, but to love one another exactly. It is since St. Paul that we admire love in this way, not for the dead whom he raised, or for the lepers he cleansed, but because Paul said, 'Who is weak, and I am not weak? Who is made to stumble, and I am not indignant?' (2 Cor. 11:29). For even if you have ten thousands miracles to compare with this, you will have nothing equal to it" (27-28). It would be better to love than to do all the great things we pride ourselves on today. To be weak for the weak, to help those who stumble—that is the ultimate blessing, the ultimate blessed life in Christ.

Kierkegaard can be a real test of one's patience and reading comprehension. In other words, reading Kierkegaard is a good way to practice love. When you love others, you have to struggle with understanding them and yourself, and you have to have the patience and strength to get to the next chapter of their lives or your life, sometimes one sentence at a time, sometimes one word at a time. Thomas J. Millay has recently penned a book called *You Must Change Your Life: Søren Kierkegaard's Philosophy of Reading*. Millay argues that for Kierkegaard,

the only point in reading a book is to change your life and relationship to God. As with books, so with people. The only reason we encounter others is to change our lives before God. And hopefully, theirs, too. Today I want to speak of one book. *Works of Love* (Tr. Howard and Edna Hong. New York: HarperPerennial, 2009) is a masterpiece of thought and scriptural reflection. Despite being a theological discourse, it makes some of the most prophetic and insightful political comments ever made. In the opening chapters alone, page after page burns like a magnesium flash—you have to stop and start, stop and start. It is nonetheless beautiful.

The book begins with a serious challenge—that love is the only meaning of life; the author says: “To cheat oneself out of love is the most terrible deception” (23). Kierkegaard uses brilliant images—a hidden lake, a tree of leaves, sterling silver, a play enacted on a stage—to view the imperative of love from different viewpoints. He says, “Every tree is known by its own fruit. So also is love known by its own fruit and the love of which Christianity speaks is known by its own fruit—revealing that it has within itself the truth of the eternal” (25). What makes this possible? It is precisely the imperative nature and its call for obedience that makes it truly a matter of the heart. All other kinds of love can place us in what is temporal, ephemeral, uncertain, privileged, preferential, or exclusive. It is only in

loving God and loving others according to the love of God that all barriers are broken down: “There is only one whom a man can with the truth of the eternal love about himself—that is God. Therefore it is not said: ‘Thou shalt love God as thyself,’ but rather, ‘Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, with all thy soul, and all thy mind.’ A man should love God in unconditional *obedience* and love him in *adoration*. It would be ungodliness if any man dared love himself in this way, or dared love another person in this way, or dared to let another person love him in this way” (36). It is a love that radically equalizes all and humbles us, setting us free from doubt and futility.

Christian love, says Kierkegaard, begins in our relationship to God: “The hidden life of love is in the most inward depths, unfathomable, and still has an unfathomable relationship with the whole of existence. As the quiet lake is fed deep down by the flow of hidden springs, which no eye sees, so a human being’s love is grounded, still more deeply, in God’s love. If there were no springs at the bottom, if God were not love, then there would be neither a little lake nor a man’s love. As the still waters begin obscurely in the deep spring, so a man’s love mysteriously begins in God’s love. As the quiet lake invites you to look at it but the mirror of darkness prevents you from seeing through it, so love’s mysterious ground in God’s

love prevents you from seeing its source...In this way the life of love is hidden, but its hidden life is itself in motion and has the eternal in itself” (27). Because *agape*, or *caritas*, is divine love, because it is not dependent on human imagination, emotion, consideration or even historical conditions, because it is merely the obedience of the faithful to the eternal Lord, love is purified of all the things that would make it deceptive, preferential, uncertain or captive to time, place and custom. It does not depend on the selfish desires of the one loving; it does not depend on the selfish desires of the one being loved. It depends on God: “Only when it is a duty to love, only then is love eternally secure. This security of the eternal casts out all anxiety and makes the love perfect, perfectly secure” (47). All other kinds of love, as good as they can be, are not free from some degree of self-love; some kinds of love are nothing but self-love (62-66). Not *agape*. It did not originate in your desires or intellect. It originated in a command from on high; it originated in true love Himself. And this is the only love that can only edify: “Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things” (1 Corinthians 13:4-7). Or as Kierkegaard explains: “Love of one’s

neighbour, on the other hand, is self-renouncing love, and self-renunciation casts out all preferential love just as it casts out all self-love—otherwise self-renunciation would also make distinctions and would nourish preference for preference” (67). You can see this in the life of Christ, especially on the way of the cross. Jesus loves Judas—he gives him an opportunity to repent. And when that does not happen, he gives him a chance to make a graceful exit from the dinner party. Jesus loves Caiaphas. Jesus loves King Herod. Jesus loves Pontius Pilate. Jesus loves the daughters of Jerusalem. Jesus loves Peter watching from far off. Jesus loves the beloved disciple and Mary standing below the cross. Jesus loves the centurion who drove the nails into his hands. Jesus loves the thief on the cross. There is no reason not to love when that love is of God, when God is love (1 John 4:8).

The most inflammatory and provocative discussion of love that Kierkegaard makes involves the degree to which the world is confused about what love means. He argues that the one who pursues Christian love will actually seem selfish or deceived because he or she does not conform to the worldly definitions of love. He or she will not participate in the great game or delusion of human love and thus seem rather strange or distant, alone even. And yet, real Christian love can overcome all barriers because it is not allowed to recognize any barrier or obstacle. It can never dominate or

be dominated. It cannot see a person in those terms. It can only see a person, whether friend, enemy, spouse, child, parent, or stranger, as neighbour, as one who is worthy of love, as one who ought to be and must be loved for God. It is the love of God. For all human beings. And its goal is nothing short of love itself. It has no other ulterior motive. It has no other packaging or nuance. It is just this: *You shall love*. As Kierkegaard summarizes most eloquently and counterintuitively, “The God-relationship is the mark whereby love towards men is recognised as genuine love. As soon as a love-relationship does not lead me to God, and as soon as I in a love-relationship do not lead another person to God, this love, even if it were the most blissful and joyous attachment, even if it were the highest good in the lover’s earthly life, nevertheless is not true love...The love-relationship is a triangular relationship of the lover, the beloved, love—but love is God. Therefore to love another person means to help him to love God and to be loved means to be helped” (124).

Modern Christianity of all stripes and persuasions is in danger of losing the Holy Spirit, of losing its lampstand, of losing its first love (Revelation 2:4, 3:14-22). It is in danger of becoming a noisy gong and a clanging cymbal, of becoming nothing itself. A game of abstractions and projections. It cannot see the trees for the forest. It is not sure what a tree

is. It would rather debate whether a tree is or is not a tree, whether it belongs to this or that forest, than to behold a tree, to care and cultivate one, to edify one blessed tree for the glory of God. But the trees are beautiful! Human beings are even more beautiful. You cannot love human beings if you do not love God. Not your neighbour, not your friends, not even yourself. And you cannot love God if you do not believe, trust, obey and love God more than anything in this world. 1 Corinthians 13 is a perfect paean to freedom, to justice, to truth, to real life. It holds a key to scripture, to all of the gospel, to life and happiness. It is an icon of Christ Himself.

On the last stretch of the misty road Thursday night, the old man began to sing and express his gratitude again. The woman apologized for the imposition. I told her not to worry. I have been walked and carried home numerous times—and possibly, no definitely, in worse shape. At the door to his building, they struggled with keys and staying upright. When he turned to me to say goodbye, the man said "I love you!" She laughed and said drunks always say that. And yet, I believed him. And I loved him, too. And I believed that I had just had an epiphany. In the mist of that dark night, the old widower and his faithful friend were the most important people in the world.