Sermons at St. Paul’s

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

Our lessons today revolve around that trio of high virtues – faith, hope and love. Jeremiah recounts the story of how he, while a young man, heard God’s call to be a prophet. He responded that he was young and had no experience in public speaking. But God assured him that he would be given the words to say and God would be with him. God asked only for Jeremiah’s faithful obedience.

The words of Psalm 71 praise God as being the source of hope and confidence in the future. Our psalmist says that this hope has sustained him since he was born.

In our gospel reading, Jesus holds up a mirror to Nazareth’s synagogue congregation, as he describes how God has sent his prophets to Gentiles, because his own people would not accept the words of the prophets. Their pleasure at his words turned to rage, and they drove this new prophet out of town. Jesus mourned their lack of faith. He might equally mourn their lack of hope.

Yet, says Paul in our Epistle reading, you can have all the hope and faith in the world, you can move mountains, but without love, it amounts to nothing. Your words are nothing but noise without love. Your wisdom and learning are shams without love. Prophecies will end, words will cease, and knowledge will become useless. But love will last.

What is so different about love? Faith and hope are two powerful forces. They are virtues that can change the world. But in the end, they operate more like flywheels than like engines. (Some of you will know what a flywheel is, and some will not. So bear with me.) A flywheel is a device that stores energy and can help a complex machine function. As the
flywheel turns, it develops momentum. As it turns, it wants to keep turning until something slows it down. You may have experienced your bike’s wheels continuing to turn, even after you stop pedaling. If you are on a smooth, flat surface, you may be able to coast quite a distance. A flywheel attached to a machine continues to turn while the machine goes on to its next task, and then provides the machine some energy to make the change through the rotational energy and momentum that the flywheel has stored up.

Faith and hope are like that. Both virtues can carry you through the changes and chances of daily life. Sometimes they are enough to get you through very serious problems – even deadly ones. Jesus praised people who had faith in God as well as those who had hope in God. Faith healed and hope blessed. The flywheels of faith and hope had carried the Jewish people through the desert, through war and captivity, and now were sustaining them under Roman rule. But sometimes both faith and hope waver. Sometimes, when life is just too hard and suffering is too acute, they may even end. For the men in Nazareth who could not hear the words of prophecy that Jesus spoke to them, faith and hope were not enough. They needed love to understand that this neighbor, Jesus, Joseph’s son, was more than a prophet who could perform miracles in Capernaum, the town down the road. They did not hear him well. They did not understand that the Messiah would heal the lame and the blind. And so they drove him out of Nazareth.

What then is love? Paul’s famous words about love have stood the test of time. They still are read at weddings and funerals. They have inspired songs and essays. Love never ends. Love is more like a mysterious force than it is like a flywheel. It is like the matter that forms creation. Some is visible and interactive, and some is a theoretical substance, dark matter, which astrophysicists describe. Dark matter cannot be seen or manipulated, and scientists are trying hard to detect it directly. It is hypothesized to form about 85% of all matter, but it does not seem to interact with the matter we can see except through the force we call gravity. What it does appear to do, is to stabilize galaxies and celestial mechanics. If there is no dark matter the theory says, then galaxies would fly apart and stars might not have solar systems. (That’s about as much as I can tell you about dark matter – we’ll need a physicist or two to get beyond that point!)
Why is love like dark matter then? Love underlies and stabilizes our relationship with God and our fellow humans. Some of it is visible to our eyes, but most is not. We often cannot see the bonds of love that hold families and communities together. Like dark matter, love seems not to depend on other matter for its existence. Love has its own rules.

As Paul says:

*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.*

*Love never ends.*

Jesus is God’s love made visible in human form. When we celebrate his birth and marvel at his death and resurrection, we participate in God’s love. Our faith and hope may bring us through the trials of life, but in the end, when we prepare to meet God, it is love that will bring us safely to the God whom we cannot see.

Faith will make us whole; hope will light the way; and love is the never-failing force that will draw us into God’s eternal presence.

Paul reminds us:

*For 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.*

*Amen.*