

SEPTEMBER 18 FATHER VIJAI AMIRTHARAJ

Sue and Sam were married for five years. After they had a good start, their relationship deteriorated. If Sue said one thing, Sam objected. And if Sam said one thing, Sue objected. Neither could do anything to satisfy the other.

One night, Sam came home and found Sue packing. "I can't stand it anymore," she said. "We are like two mean-spirited children; all we do is complain and fight. There seems to be no love left in our relationship."

Sam stood bewildered as Sue walked out of the house, down the street, to a motel. Running to his closet, he threw a few things in his suitcase and ran after Sue, shouting, "I can't stand it any longer either! I am going with you."

Sisters and brothers, we have a beautiful first reading—one that is very familiar to us, one that is favored by many couples at the time of their marriage. In many of the weddings that I officiated, this important reading took place. Probably Sue and Sam had this reading for their own wedding.

But love in words alone is not enough. It has to be shown in our actions, or else it is meaningless. And that is a very important point that Saint Paul is trying to make in our first reading today. Paul wrote this beautiful poetry on love to a divisive, dysfunctional, and divided Corinthian Christian community—a community whose members were filled with envy and self-centeredness.

In the previous chapter, chapter 12, Paul spoke of the various gifts of the Spirit given to different people so that they can look after the needs of the community. Then, in the reading we heard yesterday from the same chapter, he used the analogy of the body, saying that just as the members of the body need to work together for the smooth and proper functioning of the body, the members of the community need to work together for the smooth and proper functioning of the community.

Now, in today's passage from chapter 13, he speaks of how all those spiritual gifts he mentioned are meaningless if they are not practiced in the context of love. They are useless if they are not motivated by one's love for God and for other human beings. Love, in a way, is the glue that holds all the gifts together.

Paul is very clear to point out that the nature of a person whose life is directed by love is one of patience, one that is filled with kindness, one that is selfless, one that is truthful, and one that is constant and tolerant. In other words, the person who is directed by love does not hurt other people.

Now, sisters and brothers, Paul's description of the actions and behaviors produced by love is definitely countercultural. Of course, it speaks against the envy and self-centeredness of the Corinthian community, but it also addresses the envy, pride, and self-centeredness that is so prevalent in our own society today.

In a society where much is presented in terms of self—self-awareness, self-esteem, self-acceptance, self-image, self-realization—it will be highly provocative to propose a way of life in which a person lives for others, a life of self-sacrifice.

Now, I once heard of a man who came to his parish priest and said, "Father, I will sponsor the renovation of the entire sanctuary, but I want a big plaque with my name on it put beside the sanctuary." The parish priest thought for a moment and said, "Well, maybe I can do that when you are dead, in your memory."

Now we sang in our responsorial psalm, "Happy are the people the Lord has chosen to be his own." God has chosen each of us to be his own, and He has chosen us to live and love. We may never reach that perfect state that Paul calls us for, but every little step we take in acts of love and kindness is a step in the right direction.

And so, let us pray not to be unnecessarily critical, like the people of Jesus' time, or to be like the Corinthian community, filled with envy. Rather, may we be people who love, like our Lord, who loves us very much. Amen.