

## Love Is

1 Corinthians 13 has long been a favorite for weddings, which means it can be difficult to even hear the words without Pachelbel's "Canon in D" playing in the background. But we've been listening to Paul for a few weeks now. And we know that his letter to the church at Corinth was written long before the Knot was a glimmer in anyone's eye. Last week, we heard a bit about Paul's heartbreak and his frustration with the Corinthian church. So maybe today we can hear something other than the Wedding March in these words. While these can be helpful and inspiring wedding words, Paul is not writing to a giddy, smiling couple surrounded by adoring family and friends. He is writing to a broken church community, a community that is spending its time and energy jockeying for better seats at the table, drawing thick, menacing lines between us and them, fighting over how to share communion, and teetering on the verge of losing any real sense of who Christ has called them to be. Forget the Wedding March; I can almost hear the Corinthians humming "What's Love Got to Do with It?" This text is less about the Newlywed Game and more about Divorce Court. There is an urgency to Paul's words that we might miss when we're surrounded by tulle, flower girls, and unblemished roses. [Read 1 Corinthians 12:27-13:13.]

While Paul's words might be welcome at a wedding, I'm not sure Paul himself would be, especially not in Corinth. He may have been their founding pastor, but things have soured a bit since then. And now, this former pastor is not exactly singing the praises of the First Presbyterian Church of Corinth. He can't even be bothered to remember who among them he baptized, and yet he does love them, deeply, passionately, and unswervingly. If he did not, he

would not be wasting his breath on them. Still, I wonder if the Corinthians hear love in his rants, especially in this one. Love is here; the whole letter could be understood as a call to love. Paul knows what love should look like, and he knows in his core that love is not the private property of two starry-eyed lovebirds. Love is instead the work and witness of the entire people of God, the body of Christ.

There are different kinds of love of course. Unlike English, Greek has different words to describe them. There is *eros*—desire or romantic love, *storge*—familial love, *philia*—friendship or sibling love, and *agape*—selfless love, the love Paul speaks of here. This *agape* love describes the “proper caring for one another.”<sup>1</sup> Even if the church is doing everything else well, overflowing pews and offering plates but does not love, the church is doing and being church wrong, Paul insists. We are the body of Christ, because God so loved the world—not just me and mine, not this nation over that one, not my team instead of the other. No, God so LOVED the entire world that he sent his one and only Son to redeem and save the WHOLE mess. We are born out of love and born to love. The church at Corinth is doing this love work wrong, or they would not need Paul’s reminder. In their defense, love is not a cakewalk. Selfless love is hard work. And it is not something we are very good at teaching or learning or embodying, especially when the world around us is saturated with very little that resembles love.

Paul’s poetic language is strikingly clear in spelling out what love is and what love is not: “Love is patient and kind, it is not arrogant or boastful or rude. It does not seek its own way.” That kind of love is work. That kind of love is not our default drive. That kind of love requires us to roll up our sleeves and do the work of planting kindness and humility, the work of growing

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<sup>1</sup> Elizabeth Cole Goodrich in her paper for the Well, 2015.

justice and mercy. That kind of love requires us to look out for the good of others in all things, whether we like it or not, whether we like *them* or not. We don't get to make up the guest list. We do not get an A list and a backup B list. We get one list, God's list. To paraphrase my friend talking to her young child years ago, "We get who we get, and we don't pitch a fit." That's love. And I am a prime example of how hard it is to do and how easy it is to flub.

Thirty years ago this summer, while planning my own wedding, I served as a chaplain intern at a hospital in Annapolis, Maryland. One weekend it was my turn to be on call. I did what I was supposed to do before leaving the hospital. I stopped by the various nurses' stations to ask if they knew of anyone who might need a visit or some special attention. One nurse was particularly gruff and all but ran me off her floor. I took my tired self back to the house where I was living, gathered my dinner of cheese and crackers and an apple and headed to my little room to watch whatever reruns I could pick up on my old TV. Yep, I was as pitiful as it sounds, and I was the guest of honor at my very own pity party. Moments after sitting on the bed, the beeper went off. That same gruff nurse had paged me back to the floor to talk to a patient who was pretty sick and a big complainer. I was less than thrilled. I trudged back to the hospital harrumphing the whole way. I was put out with the nurse and with the patient. I don't remember much about the conversation with the patient, but I do remember how fired up I was to write up my experience for my verbatim with my fellow interns and my supervisor. I wrote passionately about how wronged I was—by the nurse and the patient. I felt so sure in my indignation, so full of self-righteous know-it-all-ness. I presented my experience to my group and my supervisor, confident that I would receive the sympathy and the pats on the back I so dearly deserved for putting up with such behavior. After I read my report, my supervisor was

the first one to speak, “Well you really blew that one, didn’t you?” Love is patient and kind. Love doesn’t keep a record of wrongs or hold a grudge. It was my job to show the patient love, the nurse probably needed some, too, and yes, I blew it. I had—and still have—a lot to learn.

We need to be clear: Paul does not call us to be doormats. It’s not that everything is ok. This passage has been misread and abused to compel people to stay in unhealthy and even dangerous relationships. Authentic love is not about coercion, compulsion, or neglect. Love rejoices in life and truth and justice. Loving communities do, too. And yet, when we read these words, we can easily grow discouraged. I can name times when I have been impatient, arrogant, irritable, or rude just this morning. And yet, God in Christ continues to call us to love and to keep learning how to love.

Earlier this past week, I was part of a conversation with pastor and writer Brian McLaren. He reminded those of us gathered there that love is central to the gospel. It’s the top commandment according to Jesus—love God, love neighbor as I love myself. So, to state that love is our top job seems like a fairly obvious point. And yet, if we were to ask what we the church are known for in this moment, I’m not sure love would even make the top five. McLaren mentioned how little intentional attention we have given to teaching children how to love, how to show empathy. We tend to tell ourselves that love is easy. We speak of falling in love, and yet if you ask anyone who has loved for any length of time, they will tell you that love is hard work—good work, worthwhile work—and challenging work, whether it is in a marriage, a friendship, or a community of any size. And love is most difficult when it means loving—not simply tolerating—loving someone who is radically other. And yet, that remains our job. Love is our job.

McLaren understands that we are in a precarious season and yet, he somehow still holds out hope that we can build bridges across the vast divides that lie between us as people of faith and as a nation. McLaren believes that rebuilding work begins small. He suggests that the first step is to seek out one who differs from us and to ask with genuine—and I would argue holy—curiosity: “Tell me the story of how you came to believe this or that...” He encourages us simply to initiate conversations and then listen. *Tell me the story... I am curious to know...* Yes, love is patient and kind. I am also convinced that love—God infused, Christ inspired, Holy Spirit empowered love—is also curious, courageous, attentive, generous, and humble.

In his book *The Jesuit Guide to (Almost) Everything*, Father James Martin, SJ, tells this story:

Finding God in all things also means finding God in all people. St. Alphonsus Rodriguez (1532-1617) was a Jesuit brother who for forty-six years served at the Jesuit college in Majorca, Spain, in a humble job of a porter, or doorkeeper... ‘His duty was to receive the visitors who came to the college, search out the fathers or students who were wanted in the parlors, deliver messages, run errands, console the sick at heart who, having no one to turn to, came to him, give advice to the troubled, and distribute alms to the needy.’ St. Alphonsus was devoted to finding God in the present moment. ‘Lord, let me know you, and let me know myself,’ he would pray. Each time the bell rang, he looked to the door and envisioned it was God himself who was standing outside seeking entrance. On his way, he would say, ‘I’m coming, Lord!’<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Martin, 100, as cited by Goodrich.

St. Alphonsus embodied this love work, this agape work, this properly caring for others work, not because he accomplished great and grand things but because he greeted and treated all who knocked on that door with patience and kindness, with love.

“Love, hope, and faith remain,” Paul insists. Nothing can change that, because love—persistent, resilient, curious, generous, faithful, and true—is what God is all about from beginning to end. My failure to love does not and cannot change that. For God so loved and still loves this world, this whole, embattled, weary world. That love is patient, that love is kind, that love is curious, that love is strong, and that love is, now and always. And that love is knocking at the door right now—pounding the door down in fact. How will we—the Body of Christ, God’s beloved ones answer?

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