

Not Just Another Wedding Sermon  
Jan 31, 2010

Well, the Valentine's decorations are up in all the stores, TV stations are getting romantic movies lined up, restaurants are preparing coupons, airlines are offering getaway deals.....and the lectionary reading is that great chapter on love, 1 Cor. 13. We know the imagery of the chapter – though I speak with tongues of angels but have not love....even if I give my body to be burned but have not love....its a brash noise, like clanging cymbals; it hits a wrong note, like blating brass. Love is patient, love is kind, and more.....

It's surprising to note that although almost every verse mentions love, and although many couples choose this text for their wedding services, 1 Cor. 13 is not really about romance or marriage – Paul actually wrote this beautiful poem to a fractious, contentious, side-taking, and back-stabbing group of people in the city of Corinth – a group known as the church; and he wrote it about how they **ought to be** treating each other.

Last week we looked at the variety of skills & gifts necessary for a church to function well, and how this variety wasn't supposed to split folks, but rather help them all move together, like a body's parts working together to make the body walk. At the end of that chapter, ch.12, he writes – Now let me show you an even better way to be together – and he begins to eloquently explain and extol the way of love.

Since I've moved and don't have my children running around in my life as much, I've probably been spending too much time in front of TV – pretty soon I'll be over-involved, I'm sure, just right now when I go home and collapse in my quiet house, TV chatter has become my companion. I've been getting a large dose of what the entertainment industry thinks passes as love. Yuck. TV love and movie love seems to be EITHER totally selfish – all about me and my experiences – OR it's so sentimental and mushy that we wonder if the characters are really based on humans. The police-type shows always feature the awful things people who are supposedly in love can do to each other, and those new Bachelor or Bachelorette reality shows demean romance into shallow and gamey relationships. OK, there are a few shows that seem to feature strong marriages – a few. Most of them, however, seem to be about cheating or abuse or weirdness. If these are the models sinking into the unconsciousness of folks, we're not going to understand what Paul says at all.

Paul tells us that our understanding of things is limited and partial – and the older I get, the more I agree with him. As a teenager, I remember thinking that the adults all understood the world and relationships and work and government and all those confusing things about life that seemed to always bewilder me. I couldn't wait until all those baffling things came clear and wouldn't bother me anymore. Whoops.... Adults are often mystified, too. I thought that if I learned more, things would sort themselves out - - Nope. I thought if I studied psychology I'd eliminate misunderstandings and hurts – its better, not perfect yet.

And because our apprehension and comprehension of things is partial and limited, he says, love is the highest choice. The kind of love he describes as the most mature way of faith, this love will guide us right. Other things end or fall short – love is only thing that never ends. Love is the better way.

So what kind of love is this? What is it like, if it's not the TV love, the romantic love, the mushy love, the self-centered love, the demanding and controlling love, the manipulative love?

He spells it out for us, and doesn't use the words we might use if we described a Valentine's Day love, a romantic love. Right off the bat he sets a high level of this love – love is patient, and love is kind. We might realize the value of this if we make it to our 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary; but these aren't words we'd find at the top of the list in a magazine survey. They sound kind of like sensible shoes – not very exciting, or new, or shiny or thrilling. Patience and kindness. Letting things and people take their time – letting God take time too, perhaps. Realizing we're all just humans doing the best we can, and sometimes not getting it perfect, and cutting other folks some slack. When my own children had hospital adventures, I realized I wasn't always in a great frame of mind for driving around the hospital parking lots and entrances back to the freeways – I was preoccupied; trying to be attentive, but could catch myself in various fugues where my mind went somewhere else. I decided I'd cut folks some slack around the hospitals, not get mad if they cut me off inadvertently, or were driving slow and looking for a certain building. They had a lot on their minds; maybe I could just watch out for them a little better. Patience and kindness.

Not everyone shares my priorities – we learn this with our kids, when we want to teach them how to be. We learn it more when we go off to college and have roommates. A roommate of mine was driven to distraction because I didn't clean my hairbrush out and

put it away in a drawer after every use – that was her training; mine was to leave it accessible on the dresser top. We learn it more in our relationships – from little things like which way the toilet paper unrolls to huge things like comfort levels for savings accounts. We learn it even more when we work on committees, and find some folks like it more task-oriented and others have to be brought back from tangents. And we keep learning it again and again. We're different. Patience and kindness go a long way.

Next on Paul's list of descriptive words about this ultimate love are things this love is NOT – it is not envious, not boastful, not arrogant, not rude, not irritable, and not resentful. So if we are feeling any of those things, we're know immediately that we're not dealing with this deeply religious and devotional love that is like God's. Many relationships are ruined by envy between the partners or friends, resentment of success or talent or skills as if it were somehow a bad reflection on us; when mature love would seek for the best and rejoice in the others' joy. We all know how easy it is, too, to let our anger or our bad moods spill over onto those closest to us rather than dealing with it in ourselves. Not that its bad to let our hair down, so to speak, to let off steam or talk over hurts from the day – taking it out on our friends or spouses, however, is destructive. In a letter from the apostle John, John asks, how can we say we love God, whom we cannot see, when we can't love our brother or sister who's right here? That's where the rubber hits the road – it's so much easier to love in the abstract than in the concrete; it's easier to feel sympathy with someone far away than for someone in our house. We like to think of ourselves so much more highly than we actually are.

The final “Not” is that love does not rejoice in someone getting their “comeuppance”, or getting what they so richly deserve, or getting payback. We all know the secret glee – or perhaps not so secret glee – when a person we're having trouble with gets cut down to size. God's love, however, is saddened when we have to get our just desserts, pay the price, or experience the natural consequences of our actions. God hurts with us that we have to suffer, even if it's our own fault or if we've done a lot wrong. Nothing separates us from God's love. If we love as God loves, we will share in one another's pain, not gloat.

Finally there are the “all things” love does – love bears all things; believes all things; hopes all things; endures all things. Wow. This is not a Pollyanna belief or hope, nor is it a doormat type of enduring and bearing everything. Rather, it's a deep recognition that the

other is worth so much, the relationship is worth so much, that it outweighs the difficulty. Paul isn't telling people to endure abusive situations or dangerous, harmful situations – we can take steps to protect our safety and still value the other; we can remove ourselves from risky situations and still care that the other be eventually OK. Again, this is how God loves us – whatever we might throw at God, God can take it and still love us. Whatever we might do that falls short, and whatever consequences we might have to take, God stands strongly on our side through it all.

This is an amazing love. Bigger than parental love. Bigger than marital love. Bigger than we can imagine. Bigger than we deserve, expect, or understand. And it's how God leads us to love each other as well. Christian community ought to be setting the gold standard of love between people; demonstrating a radical acceptance and welcoming love between people; a hopeful and enduring love through thick and thin together; standing with each other despite it all. It's a love that can heal and transform, just as God's love heals and transforms us first. We need to work for this and pray for this, because the world sure needs people who can offer it. In our competitive, self-absorbed, arrogant world, humanity needs us to hold out the very love of God. In our short-sighted, bottom-line oriented, game-playing world, people need us to offer the unconditional love of God. In our unconscious, unreflective, blaming world, our fellow-travelers need the depth of acceptance that God's love can give.

Paul says that love is the better way, and that love never ends. May this be our vision as well. AMEN.