

SERMONSECOND
PRESBYTERIAN
CHURCH

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That Our Love May Be Complete

1 Corinthians 13:1-13

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It was either late in Elementary School or early in Junior High that I first noticed some of my classmates wearing a particular type of necklace.

It was a necklace designed for couples, which meant it had two chains, each with half of a heart attached. If you held them side-by-side, they would fit together to form a perfect heart.

Written into each half of the heart was a verse from the Bible that said this: “The Lord watch between you and me while we are absent one from the other.” Isn’t that beautiful?

If you’re thinking of what to get that special someone for Valentine’s Day—which is fast approaching, you might want to see if you can find one of those two-part hearts with that sweet-sounding verse—the Lord watch between you and me while we are absent one from the other.”

Of course, you might want to know what the verse really means. I used to think that was absolutely beautiful, and in a way it is. But then I learned what that verse was really about. It was spoken by one person—not to his significant other—but to his rival. In that context it meant something like this: “I don’t trust you; you don’t trust me. So may God watch you when I can’t, and may God watch me when you can’t.”

You know how it goes, though. We tend to co-opt passages of scripture and use them in certain situations, which is why you will almost always hear John 14 read at a funeral. Or this passage from 1 Corinthians at a wedding.

I don’t know why in the midst of a wedding’s pageantry, ritual, and beauty, couples insist—almost universally—on having 1 Corinthians 13 read. Oh, I suppose I know why, at one level. It is some of the most exquisite writing in the New Testament. It has been cross-stitched, written in calligraphy, placed on bumper stickers, and rendered in countless other ways, all a testament to its beauty and power.

My buddy Chris, a pastor in TN, once wrote about the time he found himself sitting at a wedding reception many years ago. The woman across the table, someone he didn’t know, marveling at the words he had read from 1 Corinthians 13, said to Chris, “That was the most beautiful poetry I have ever heard. Did you write that yourself?”

Chris writes, “After taking a moment to reflect on the growing biblical illiteracy of our culture and tamping down my prideful impulse to say, ‘Why, yes, it is one of several pieces of mine in a new book I just published. If you liked that one, you’ll love the one I wrote how the Lord is my shepherd.’ I admitted that it was from the Bible.

“Oh,” she said without missing a beat. “Well it was beautiful, just what a new couple needs to hear. It’s like he was writing directly to married couples.”

Well, not exactly. I do think married couples benefit from it, no doubt, but they were certainly not Paul’s primary audience. Paul was writing not to individual couples, but to the church. And not just any church, but a congregation in the midst of severe conflict. If you wandered into the sanctuary or a session meeting of First Church, Corinth, you immediately noticed the factions. They were fighting about everything.

In fact, they were the poster-church for dysfunction, with conflict spinning through every relationship in the congregation. They may have experienced one baptism, one Lord, one God and Father of all, but they turned it into one big mess.

I mean they were arguing over everything. They argued about what food you should eat, and when you should eat it.

They argued about which pastor in the church’s past was the greatest.

They argued about what sort of music to play in worship.

They argued about spiritual gifts.

They even found a way to argue about who was the most faithful, failing to realize that it’s impossible to be faithful when you forsake the way of love made clear in the way of Jesus Christ.

So Paul writes them a letter, a letter in which he writes about the conflict and calls the Christians gathered in Corinth to come to their senses. “Remember,” Paul encourages them, “you have put on Christ Jesus. And you are like one body with many members, each with its own part. You need each other. And the gifts that you have were given by God for the building up of the church—not for the tearing up of the church. Remember who you are. Remember that because you belong to God, you also belong to one another.”

Just before our passage today, Paul launches into metaphorical language to show the absurdity of dividing up the way they have, saying they all have functions in the Body of Christ just like the various parts of the body function to help the whole. Do you remember how Paul puts it? “If the whole body were an eye, where would the hearing be; if the whole body were hearing, where would the sense of smell be?”

After listing all the gifts and the ways they work together, Paul sums up his argument by saying, in essence, “Now let’s set all of that aside, and I will show you a still more excellent way.”

And he stumbles, as is often the case with Paul, into some of the most beautiful language in all of scripture. But it is easy, if we are not careful, to allow the beauty of the language to distract us from its radical call, a call which works its way to the central affirmation, an affirmation that seems quite jarring on a wedding day—that everything we see is passing away. 1 Corinthians is nothing short of a meditation on death, and the life that waits on the other side, and the sorts of things we can carry with us from this life to the next.

Paul then speaks of love, and when he does that here, he uses the highest form of love there is—agape love—and in doing so, he sets the bar as high as it can go—so high, in fact, that one commentator (Tom Wright) says this, “We have all failed quite dramatically to clear that height.”

The Corinthians have failed to clear it by believing that they could practice all the other gifts of faith but not have agape—not have love—which makes all their speaking in tongues sound like “a noisy gong or a clanging symbol,” all their high-browed spirituality, without love, is nothing, and they, even with all these things, gain nothing without love.

They, and we, lean forward to learn what this love is that puts all these other virtues to shame: patient, kind, not envious, boastful, arrogant, or rude; doesn’t insist on its own way, is not irritable or resentful; rejoices not in wrongdoing, but the truth; bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.”

But that kind of love does not come easy.

I like the way Tom Wright writes about this in his commentary on this passage. He writes, Left to my own devices, “I would be small-minded, unkind, jealous, fussy, puffed up, shameless. There are some things I wouldn’t bear, many things I wouldn’t believe, several things I wouldn’t be able to hope for, and a whole multitude of things I wouldn’t endure. I would fail.”

And that is why we stand in this place for a wedding, and it is why we are here now in worship, because we know we cannot do this agape love on our own. It is a language to be learned, but like any language, it requires work. We are called to move from immaturity to maturity in love, and it cannot be done apart from God’s grace.

And so, in order to get there, Paul invites us to a most uncomfortable reflection. Everything is passing away. Even at a wedding, we are called to remember that all the beautiful dresses and fancy tuxes, all the flowers, the building in which we find ourselves, and we too—all is passing away. None of it will stand at the end. All, says Paul, except for these three great virtues: faith, hope, and love. These remain.

As Wright says, “What we do in the present, in the Lord, is not wasted. Love is the language they speak in God’s world. Love is the music they make in God’s world. Love is not a duty; it is our destiny.”

Yes, all couples, all friends, all congregations, all families, all people, even when faced with the challenge of love that Paul describes here, can practice these three great virtues, can have a settled trust in God, can cultivate a hope that God will never leave us or forsake us, can love with agape love, not perfectly, not completely, but more like looking in a darkened mirror. We will make lots of mistakes in loving—what Miroslav Volf calls baby steps on the path to love—but no matter. All our acts of faith, hope, and love are never wasted. They last; they are eternal.

We love to say, “You can’t take it with you.” And it’s true, for the most part. The things we have will have to stay. The houses and the boats and the titles and the degrees, the portfolio—all of it stays behind. The accomplishments, no matter how grand, don’t get to make the journey. You can’t take it with you.

But the acts of love, the patience, the long-suffering, truthful, kind ways you choose to engage with others; the helpfulness you extend with no thought for yourself; the acts of kindness you do; the ways you cultivate love—agape love—toward God and others? These you can take with you, for these are the things eternity is made of—faith, hope, and love—these and nothing else.