

“A MORE EXCELLENT WAY”
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I Corinthians 13

John 15:9-17

If you’ve ever been to a wedding, chances are you probably heard this morning’s Epistle lesson read. I would imagine that at least 75% of all weddings that I do include this passage of scripture. And why not? It is an absolutely beautiful description of Godly love.

But you know what? Sometimes when I’m reading it at a wedding or hearing it read at a wedding, I think to myself, this couple has absolutely no idea what these words mean, or will mean. Oh sure, they’re standing there all starry-eyed, madly in love with each other, and they absolutely, positively know that yes, indeed, they will be patient and kind, never irritable or resentful. And of course, they’ll never act like a child!

While I’m at it, they also have absolutely no idea the depth of meaning of the vows they share - for better or worse, for richer or poorer, in sickness and in health. Once again, standing there all starry-eyed and madly in love, they just know that everything’s going to be wonderful, and even if it isn’t, it’ll be okay.

Now, I love doing weddings, but I’ll tell you something. It’s the renewal of vows ceremonies that really get to me - especially those who renew their vows on their 50th wedding anniversary. When **they** hear that lesson from I Corinthians, well, they know what that kind of love is, and how hard it is to live that way. And when they stand and look into each other’s eyes, and say again those words, “for better or for worse, for richer or poorer, in sickness and in health” very, very often they will tear up, because they’ve lived them. They know that sometimes love goes through the worse, sometimes there is no money, sometimes sickness creeps in and changes everything.

Love is hard work. I don’t mean to be a downer as we near Valentine’s Day, but that’s reality. Love, real, true love is hard work. The Apostle Paul knew that, and that’s one of the reasons he included this chapter in his letter to the Corinthians. They were having a tough time. They were a young church, and they were falling victim to jealousy, and people trying to show they were more important than others, that their gifts were better than others.

Immediately before this passage, in chapter twelve, Paul talks to them about all the different gifts God gives through the Spirit, and how all of them are

important and necessary. No one is more important than another. They were getting that. They were fighting amongst themselves, and it was threatening to tear this fledgling church apart. Paul invites them to understand that they were all gifted, they were all important, and that there was a more excellent way for them to live together as the body of Christ - and the more excellent way is love.

And then he pours out these beautiful words. "You can have all the gifts imaginable," he says. "You can speak eloquently, you can prophesy, you can give away everything you have, but if you have not love, all that you are and all that you do is hollow and empty. You are grown adults," he continues, "put away your childish ways - your jealousy, your insistence on being number one. Instead, put on love."

The love Paul talks about is the kind of love of which Jesus spoke in the gospel lesson - a love that is for the other person, a love that cares deeply for that other person, a love that sacrifices rather than takes, a love that lifts up rather than tears down, a love that bears all things rather than loses patience. This kind of love is not just a warm, fuzzy feeling, it is instead a way of life. And it is, indeed, the kind of love with which we are loved by Jesus Himself.

I read a story about this kind of love this week that deeply touched me. It was told by a newspaper reporter named Mike Harden of the Columbus Dispatch. It's the story of a man by the name of Frank and his wife Mary. Let me read some of it to you:

"When Frank pushed himself into an upright position in the hospital bed, the heart monitor's fluid cursive line disintegrated into an erratic scribble. 'I told the doctor,' he said, peeking at the edge of the curtain to make sure that his wife Mary was not within earshot. 'I told him that I felt like I was drowning. He said this is what happens when you have congestive heart disease. I told him I'd rather he throw me off the roof instead.'

Mary returned to the room, drawing a chair to his bedside. 'Thirsty,' he complained. She lifted the straw to his lips as he pulled the oxygen mask aside. His medicine made him sick then. She fetched the basin, wrapped a firm arm around his spasm-racked shoulders, mopped the sweat from his forehead. In sickness and in health. They were supposed to be preparing for a Florida vacation, not holding on to each other in a cardiac care unit. 'Help me sit up,' he whispered hoarsely.

Harden then says, "In the end, love comes down to this; not Clark Gable's devilish first appraisal of Vivien Leigh, not Burt Lancaster and Deborah Kerr rolling in the surf, but 'Help me sit up.' . . .

. . . One evening, Frank was sitting asleep in the chair next to the bed. Mary paused in the waiting room to remove her street shoes and put on her slippers. She did not want to wake him now that sleep was such a rationed luxury. Soundlessly, she slipped into the chair next to his. In the end, love is not the smoldering glance across the dance floor, the clink of crystal, a leisurely picnic spread upon summer's clover. It is the squeeze of a hand. I'm here. I'll be here, no matter how long the fight, even when you want most to quit.

So when all is said and done (Harden finishes), love is not rapture and fire. It's a hand steadier than one's own, squeezing harder than a heartbeat."

(On-line, "Love Doesn't Always Feel Like It," Gil Bowen)

That friends, is the kind of love Jesus and Paul were both talking about. Love that is there, love that stays there no matter how hard it is, love that wants what's best for the other person. Love that perseveres.

It's the kind of love you and I, as children of God and disciples of Christ, are invited to share with those around us. In our personal lives, with that one special person, with our families and our friends; in our working lives, with those with whom we work and all with whom we come into contact; and indeed, in everyday life.

It is not easy. No indeed. It is not easy, especially because we live in a world that tells us to think of ourselves first, to push ourselves forward, to compare ourselves with others. It is not a world that encourages sacrifice and suffering for the sake of someone else.

So it is not easy. But it is, in Paul's words, the more excellent way, the way of Jesus. So as we prepare to celebrate Valentine's Day, I hope you'll remember these two passage of scripture. I hope you'll choose the more excellent way, the way of love. I hope you'll do the hard work of love, for in so doing, someone will see the face of Christ, and know His love in their lives.

As you come forward for communion this morning, when you receive the bread and the cup, remember that those elements are symbols of exactly that kind of love that was poured out for you and me on Calvary. A love that cared more for you and me than for Himself, a love that was and is patient and kind with us, a love that lifts us up, that rejoices with us when we're happy and weeps with us when we're not. A love that bears all things, and bore all things for us when He gave His life that we might have life in abundance.

In thankfulness for His love for us, may we choose to live the more excellent way - the way of love. May it be so.

Amen.