

The Primacy of Love

It's hard to even hear this famous passage from 1 Corinthians 13 and not think of a wedding, or picture it beautifully cross-stitched in a silver frame. It's the most common wedding reading by far, and adorns many an ornate display in people's houses. And I understand why. It is a wonderful, concise definition of love, and at the same time a daunting reminder of what our own love should look like. But in its actual context in the letter to the Corinthians, it is less like something told to newlyweds deeply in the thralls of love, and more akin to an admonition given by the marriage counselor as the couple is contemplating divorce.

Paul is writing to one of the churches he founded which find itself in the midst of seemingly irreconcilable strife. They are actively in discussion about who to throw out of the community and whether to break up as a group. There problems are numerous, but not unfamiliar to anyone who has ever been a part of a church. They think some people are not living up to the Christian standard as they interpret it. They find little to no value in the gifts and talents that some members of the community bring to the group, and are upset when others don't see how amazing their gifts are. And some of them have little patience for the way the church is evolving, preferring to return to the golden years of the past.

Sounds like church, or to be fair, any other group made up of flawed human beings. It is into this situation that Paul writes the famous reminder of 1 Corinthians 13 - "Love is patient and kind. Love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never ends." In its context it is a reminder that borders on being a powerful rebuke. The truth is, we too often sentimentalize the passage, paint it with flowers and adorn it with lace, and forget that it is at the very least a pointed reminder to us, and more likely a rebuke of the ways we are failing to properly love; the way we are cheapening love, and making it less than the truly difficult work that Paul describes it as - patient, and not self-seeking, score-keeping, or self congratulatory, enduring, and hopeful in the face of reality, and managing all that without being arrogant. That is the call, and it's a tall order.

The counterpoint to this talk is always - "yeah, we all think love is important, but some things are wrong, and we should call those out and push the wrongdoers from our midst. Morality and holiness matter after all." That was, incidentally, the Corinthians argument. But here is Paul's response - if you speak with the voice of angels, if you can prophecy, if you wisdom and can understand all things, knowing perfectly what is right and wrong in any situation, but you don't act in love, it is all worthless; it doesn't point to God. In other words, being right is not Christian, not godly, if done unlovingly. A clanging symbol is the piercing sound of being right without love. Everyone who has ever had an important relationship knows the truth that there are battles that are not worth winning because of the way they were fought. Sacrificing love for being right is the resounding gong that signals the death of a relationship. Even pious acts of charity - giving all you have to the poor - if it is not done as a profound act of love, is ultimately deemed meaningless.

This is why being loving is a higher priority than being right, even in matters of faith - we are simply not very good at determining what is right, so we should seek to cover over that terrible human flaw with a great cover of love. Human beings have long been notoriously bad at recognizing God in our world, and of knowing God's will, so we should err on the side of being like God in our love. Today's gospel is a prime example. Jesus comes to his own home town and starts to tell them about the meaning of the gospel. Quoting from the prophet Isaiah, he tells them that he is there to set the captives free, and restore sight to the blind, and proclaim good news to the poor, today, in their very midst.

But the crowd does what people tend to do - they begin to criticize: isn't that Jesus? Is he really the right messenger? Is he qualified to say this? What about those miracles he was doing for the gentiles up in Capernaum? Why doesn't he do those here? I'd prefer that to the things he's talking about since I'm not in prison or blind. They were less concerned with the coming of the kingdom of God and more worried about things being the way they wanted them to be, and so they ran Jesus out of their presence. We should all worry about that being our fate when we care more about everything being right and exactly the way we want it to go, rather than being loving. By our actions and our attitudes are we forcing Jesus from our very midst?

Jesus reminds them of who actually gets to stand in the presence of God and witness salvation. He references the widow of Zarephath in Sidon. When Elijah comes to her in the midst of a multi-year drought and asks her for food, she shares. She has no faith in him as a prophet and she is beyond hope. She is on her way home to use the last of her resources to cook the final meal for herself and her son before they run out of food and die. She doesn't actually believe that Elijah can help her, because she invites him to follow her on to die. But her lack of faith and hope is made up for in her profound act of love - a love that reaches beyond herself and her personal needs. She invites this stranger to share in the meager resources of her last provisions. She was loving, and so she got to stand in the presence of the prophet of God.

You see, love is not a spiritual gift that some get and some don't. It is not a currency to be bartered and traded. Love is the primacy of life in Christ. Love is enduring because it is the mark of God's presence enduring in us. Without it we are not followers of Christ, we are not bearers of Christ, we are not even living in Christ. This is the lesson we all need to learn in a divisive and fragmented world.

Whether it be in the tenuous relationships of our greater Anglican communion, in the fractured parts of this old diocese, in the bonds that hold us together as a particular church after years of turmoil, or our own interpersonal relationships, we need this message from Paul and the lesson of the Corinthians. We disagree, and not just over small and petty things; we disagree over human sexuality, over how we read the Bible, over the future of the church and the right way forward. Those are no small things, unless they are compared to the immensity of Christ's love that we are called to manifest in our lives. Then they are small things, and we should let the enduring love of Christ be our guide and our mark in the world.

Jesus tells us that he is here today to proclaim freedom, and healing, and forgiveness in our very midst. Let us not chase him away because we failed to love. Because, though faith and hope and love are all important and abiding characteristics of Christian life, the only one that endures, the only one with a future is love. One day the object of our faith will become a present reality, and our great hope will be actualized in our midst, and we will need those virtues no

more. But to live in that reality, we will still need love. On that day love will be all in all. We prepare for that day, by living out the admonition to love on this day. Amen.