

This passage, as you probably know, is a favorite one for weddings. Yet, within the letter of I Corinthians, it has nothing to do with marriage. That its truths apply both to what makes for a good marriage and what makes for a healthy church reveals the transcendent and essential nature of love.

Paul was writing to a church in trouble. He chastises the Corinthian church for its messed up priorities. How quickly the followers of Jesus turn away from his teachings and become an institution that forgets what Jesus' life was about! As a seaport, Corinth attracted many kinds of people from different places, and the church there seemed to have a little something for everyone--speaking in tongues, prophecy, and potlucks. The Lord's Supper, our Holy Communion, was included in these dinners. But the dinners had strayed from a sacred act of binding the community together to a party where food was gorged and people got drunk. There was a lot of disorderly conduct in the Corinthian church. Paul was giving them some tough love to try and bring them back to what they had been called to be as church. After chastising them with a degree of specificity in previous chapters, in chapter 13, he describes the ideal to which they should strive. They should be expressions of love.

I imagine that many of us have perused the Valentine card section over the past week and read a lot of descriptions about what love is. But it is difficult to be more precise or poetic than these words: ***Love is patient; love is 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.***

Perhaps we might reflect on what these words look like in everyday relationships. Patient, kind, not arrogant or rude sound like just plain good manners and the value of good manners is not to be underestimated. In a couple of weeks we will have our church rummage sale. It is good for us to remember our manners when we're exhausted from preparing for this project, especially as it is a learning project and fundraising for the youth. Their expectations and abilities may be different than ours are. But the rummage sale will only last a few days; we will live in relationship with each other for many days and years to come. Our goal for the sale is to raise enough money to give our kids a life-changing experience at the Western Regional Youth Event. Patience, kindness, and politeness create "safe spaces" for relationships, for growing, and for learning.

Love does not insist on its own way. When we're 2 or 4 or teenagers we may insist on our own way. Mature love does not. We learn in time that there is often more than one right way to do things, and it doesn't always have to be our right way. Taking turns is a good thing. And love trumps always having to be right! Love doesn't say "I told you so." Love is having a reverence for the other: reverence for the Holy and for those we love and for those with whom we work and worship. It's not about making assumptions. It's not "putting up with" the other person but really honoring the other and opening ourselves to actually being changed because of their influence on us. Love offers freedom, the freedom to be honest, the freedom to become. We love the child of possibilities; and those possibilities do not need to be, nor should they be possibilities we determine for the other person, but rather, possibilities we watch with wonder as they are revealed in the life of the one we love.

Andrew Young describes the day he was introduced as the United States ambassador to the United Nations, and on the stage his father leaned over and said to President Carter that his son would have been a good dentist--the profession his father intended for him to be. Much to his father's dismay, Young had become an ordained pastor in the UCC before his political life. Love celebrates the other person's successes and provides solace in the face of failure. Love is the ongoing presence of another person with whom our joys and sorrows are safely expressed. Love offers a welcoming space to the other person to explore, experiment, and be heard.

The qualities of love describe by Paul were all modeled through the incarnation of God in Christ. Some of us describe this incarnation of God through Christ as creative-responsive love. God in Christ showed us how to become co-creators for good in the world; God in Christ showed us how to create something new and novel beyond where we sometimes find ourselves stuck. God in Christ modeled for us that love is responsive to what need to be transformed; love is the energy for justice and our work to make the world a home for all creation. Love is not passive; love responds with relational power to create something beautiful for God. Love tells the truth even when the truth is hard to say. (For us Jane Austen fans, it's like Mr. Knightly saying, "Badly done, Emma, badly done" a critique that enables Emma to be changed or the better.) A person who loves stands up for what is right while respecting that the other person may not always share the same view.

Love gives us the strength to bear even what seems unbearable. Love is sustained with hope and the belief that creative-responsive love can be working for good even when the moment seems bleak. Love never ends; there is an immortal quality to love. Love brings us to that place where we realize that no amount of time with our beloved will be enough, and yet, it will always be enough because love has filled every hidden recess of our hearts. We see modeled in Christ's love the willingness to extend oneself for the sake of the other. Jesus did not shy away from loving those judged to be unworthy. He did not show pretense or arrogance. His life was the ultimate love story that knows no end.

In these words from I Corinthians, Paul tries to draw the church back to its true reason for being. It's a lesson worth remembering. It is human nature, and thus, easy for churches to forget and begin to dwell on personal preferences for worship style and churchly agendas. It is human nature to want to play it safe and not to entertain change. So it's important to remember the case study of the Corinthian church lest we forget that love for God and one another is always more important than our personal preferences or the projects we feel are so desperately important. We learn from this text to let love do its work on our hearts, we learn to be brave and open, we learn that love endures and our daily accomplishments only endure through what love creates. We don't know how long this building, this church, will endure. But we place our trust in the love that is shared within and without for as long as San Dimas Community Church endures.

Years ago I came across a beautiful Jewish saying that I sometimes use in memorial services, but I think it fits here: ***When I die, if you need to weep, cry for someone walking on the street beside you. And when you need me, put your arms around others and give them what you need to give me. You can love me most by letting hands touch hands and souls touch souls. You can love me most by sharing your joys and multiplying your good deeds. And when you say prayers for me, remember this: love doesn't die. So when all that's left of me is love, give me away.***