

**“Love Is More Than Feelings”
1 Corinthians 12:31-13:13**

You've heard those words many times. Indeed, 1 Corinthians 13 is to the New Testament what Psalm 23 is to the Old. Brides love it. They often ask to have it read at their wedding. I have some good news and bad news for such brides. First, the bad news – it has absolutely nothing to do with romance and marriage. It has everything to do with God's love for us. In context, it's really quite an unsettling passage. It addresses church politics. Doesn't that topic make you quiver?

The congregation of Christians at Corinth had to have been the most conflicted church in history, maybe with the Presbyterians running a close second. There were more controversies created by personalities, doctrines, ethics and experiences of Christian faith than you would think possible in any one church.

This chapter sits between chapters 12 and 14 like the eye in the middle of a hurricane. In the 12th chapter which we looked at a couple of weeks ago, Paul tells us that the Holy Spirit gives different members of the church different gifts for the functioning of the church, for the common good. If you read between the lines, however, you feel the conflict.

Can you imagine one of our ears wishing it was an eye? Yet there were some in the church who didn't value their own gifts and were envious of others. Can you imagine one of our eyes saying to our hands, "I have no need of you?" Yet there were some in the church who crowed about their own superiority and who looked down on others.

The 14th chapter focuses on turmoil created by those Christians who were always on religious highs and can't understand why everyone else isn't. Paul would typically describe them as "those with the gifts of healing, working of miracles, prophecy, and speaking in tongues." Some years ago I met a nurse in the hospital who, when she learned I was a Presbyterian pastor said that she had been a Presbyterian in the past. On a pilgrimage through various traditions, she most recently attends a church with a Pentecostal style of worship. She told me, "I really like dancing in the aisles and waving my arms in praise of God." People who have that need tend to think that "they've got the Spirit" while dull and stuffy Presbyterians don't! (Parenthetically, I take great comfort in the fact that Paul lists *administrators*¹ as among those gifted in the life of the church, and also that the Presbyterian mantra, *do things decently and in order*, comes this same portion of scripture.²)

Paul says that religious ecstasy is great. He wished all could experience it. He claims to enjoy the gifts of ecstasy himself. But he also points up the inherent danger: the claim that this particular gift of the Spirit is the only gift worth mentioning. It becomes *the* gift of the Spirit.

In between those chapters is the 13th which describes a better way of being church – love. Doctrines, experiences, ethics, acts of courage and sacrifice count for nothing without love. That's always the bottom line in the Bible. **"We know that we have passed from death to life because**

we love one another," said John.³ How did Jesus say the world would know we were his disciples? Because we love one another.⁴ Whatever the gospel is that we preach, whatever motivates our mission, if it is not rooted in love, it is a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal! If our preaching is judgmental, if our mission is self-serving, all is hollow and in vain.

The overriding quality of this love is its tenacity. It is totally other-centered and it just never gives up on the other. **"It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never ends."**

Such love is hard work. It doesn't sound romantic at all! It doesn't easily fit into a wedding liturgy. But think again. Here's where there is good news for brides considering this passage. Besides describing God's love for us and the way members of the Body of Christ should love one another, 1 Corinthians 13 has implications for all human relationships, even the marriage relationship.

Consider societies where marriages are arranged. They don't begin with romantic feelings. They begin with a commitment out of which romantic feelings can grow. When I'm talking with couples preparing to get married, I remind them of that reality. Then I read them a few sentences from *The Road Less Traveled*, by the late M. Scott Peck.

Of all the misconceptions about love the most powerful and pervasive is the belief that "falling in love" is love or at least one of the manifestations of love ... We fall in love only when we are consciously or unconsciously sexually motivated ... [and] ... the experience of falling love is invariably temporary. No matter whom we fall in love with, we sooner or later fall out of love if the relationship continues long enough ... The feeling of ecstatic lovingness that characterizes the experience of falling in love always passes. The honeymoon always ends. The bloom of romance always fades.⁵

Peck goes so far as to suggest that real love can't begin until a couple "fall out of love." He continues,

I am implying that real love does not have its roots in a feeling of love. To the contrary, real love often occurs in a context in which the feeling of love is lacking, when we act lovingly despite the fact that we don't feel loving.

Real love, for Scott Peck, and for St. Paul in this passage, is an act of will. Real love is willing the well-being of the other, whether you feel like it or not. Isn't that what the wedding vows mean? "To love and to cherish in plenty and in want; in joy and in sorrow; in sickness and in health..." That is, we promise to love even when it's most difficult to love, even when we don't feel like it.

Frederick Buechner writes in a similar vein,

In a Christian sense, love is not primarily an emotion but an act of will. When Jesus

tells us to love our neighbors, he is not telling us to love them in the sense of responding to them with a cozy emotional feeling. You can as well produce a cozy emotional feeling on demand as you can a yawn or a sneeze. On the contrary, he is telling us to love our neighbors in the sense of being willing to work for their well-being even if it means sacrificing our own well-being to that end, even if it means sometimes just leaving them alone. Thus in Jesus' terms we can love our neighbors without necessarily liking them. In fact liking them may stand in the way of loving them by making us overprotective sentimentalists instead of reasonably honest friends.⁶

I agree with the thinking of Peck, a psychiatrist, and Buechner, a theologian. They are faithful to the Biblical witness. I take issue with Dr. Peck, however, when he says that “The feeling of ecstatic lovingness *always* passes; the bloom of romance *always* fades.” It doesn't have to. The flame may flicker, but it doesn't have to go out. I also doubt that any of us would be content with a love that is only a kind of stone-cold act of will that is void of feelings. Real grace is liking the one you love.

About nine years ago this time of year, Lucy and I were getting ready for our big move back north so I could become your pastor. I had some things I wanted to do before I left Florida. One was to dine at the Don Caesar on St. Pete Beach. It's a grand hotel that once was used as a hospital for the troops during World War II. Now it has been restored to its former glory, if you think shocking pink is glorious.

It was Super Bowl Sunday so there weren't many people around. Everyone was getting ready for the big game, except me. What did I care. The Buffalo Bills weren't playing, the Tampa Bay Buccaneers weren't playing, the Philadelphia Eagles weren't even playing.

It was a beautiful, quiet setting. Suddenly three men wearing tuxedos showed up, one carrying a bass, another an accordion, and the third had a violin. They were followed by this couple who rolled up a piece of carpet like they owned the place. They waved to us to come down and dance with them.

It was their 40th wedding anniversary. They love going to the Don Caesar and they love to dance, so their children provided the music in their favorite setting for their own private party. They were having a most wonderful time. If you could have seen them dance and watched them kiss, you would have thought they were on their honeymoon. The husband even said he'd rather dance with his wife than watch the Super Bowl. Now there's a man who's in a marriage for the long haul!

I bet they were having an even better time than they did on their honeymoon. I don't know anything about them, but I suspect they had gone through some difficult times in their marriage. You can't be married that long and not experience some rocky moments. But there was an obvious commitment to their relationship, a tenacity in their love, that allowed their romance to grow so that, no doubt, as they approach their 50th anniversary, it will be better than their 40th, especially if celebrated at the Don Caesar.

I know, it doesn't always work that way. Sometimes the marriage relationship is so destructive that the most loving thing to do is to end it. I've even known some couples who reach the 50-year mark but their marriage is better characterized as one that was endured with very little endearment. I'd wonder what harm they may have done to each other and any children they had by sticking it out, "come hell or high water." On the other hand, too much of the time husbands and wives are looking for such perfection in the other and in their relationship that the least little flaw may cause them to split. But none of us is perfect and we don't love with a perfect love, in marriage or in any relationship. We'd deal more tenderly with each other if we'd remember that. Only God's love is perfect and God's love casts out all fear.⁷

The late Lewis Smedes has done extensive study on guilt and forgiveness. He writes,

Guilt was not my problem as I felt it. What I felt most was a glob of unworthiness that I could not tie down to any concrete sins I was guilty of. What I needed more than pardon was a sense that God accepted me, owned me, held me, affirmed me, and would never let go of me even if he was not too much impressed with what he had on his hands.⁸

The Gospel word is that God's love will not let us go. A relationship with God is never destructive. Make your commitment or renew your commitment and honor your commitment, even if you don't know much about God. Your commitment might blossom into a full romance with God. As the old prayer says:

to know God is to love God;
to love God is to serve God;
to serve God is to find perfect freedom.

1. 1 Corinthians 12:28, Revised Standard Version; The New International Version refers to *gifts of administration*; The New Revised Standard Version refers to *forms of leadership*; The Message translates as *organizers*.
2. 1 Corinthians 14:30
3. 1 John 3:14
4. John 13:35
5. (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1978), p. 84
6. Wishful Thinking, p. 54.
7. 1 John 4:18

8. from Shame and Grace, quoted by Philip Yancey in "What's So Amazing About Grace?" (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997), p. 36.