

WHAT KIND OF LOVE?

Romans 12: 9-18; 1 Corinthians 13

1) Brad and Sam were brothers. But they'd never got along. Sam was the younger of the two. He always felt put down and criticized by Brad. Brad was good looking, into sports, popular in school. Sam was shyer. He preferred drawing and reading books. But this was always viewed as a little anti-social by his parents and their friends. Brad was the popular one, with many friends and a bright future. Sam seemed to be hiding and holding himself back. As they got older and life happened, the brothers drifted further apart. Brad was always travelling and jet setting. His good looks, charm and social abilities were getting him ahead. He was climbing the corporate ladder. Sam had become an artist, but one struggling to be noticed and appreciated by a wider audience. To make ends meet he taught part-time at a local college. Brad the success and Sam the struggler. It's as if they were living out a destiny foreshadowed in their childhoods.

But things changed. Brad was now in a hospital bed, at the end of his marriage, fired from his corporate job after having gambled other people's money and lost, having attempted suicide and failed. Sam went to see him. He had to work through some complicated feelings he had forgotten were there until he saw his brother again after many years. Brad the hero, the star, the success... ending up like this. Seeing his brother so vulnerable and sad, Sam yearned to embrace him, for them to cry together. He loved his brother. And yet, all the accumulated resentment... How to get past that... How to work through that...

2) Somewhere else in the same hospital, there was Moira. Diana was by her side. Moira and Diana had been friends since high school. Over the years their friendship had grown. There were times when they couldn't see each other much. Diana's husband had got a post overseas. Years later, Moira had a serious diagnosis of cancer. Diana arranged to come and stay with Moira, to be there with her through all the treatments. Their relationship really deepened through that time. Then there was Diana's terrible sense of loneliness trying to raise a child with severe mental health challenges while her husband made himself busier and busier at work... Moira was there to support her through all that, and especially when Diana's husband finally left, having had an affair with his secretary for years... As they began to move into the latter half of life, the friendship moved toward a richer affection and enjoyment... Now Moira was dying of cancer. She didn't want to die in hospital. Diana would be there by her side as they made plans to have Moira die at home. They were friends for life and they would be there for each other to the last...

3) In the hospital room down the hall, there was Beth, sitting on Randal's bed, holding his hand... Randal couldn't speak as he had all kinds of tubes running through his mouth down his throat... But he was looking at Beth as she was looking at him. A memory came back to her and the vivid feelings that went with that memory... the memory of the first time Beth had seen Randal. He was a friend of a friend, and they had all gone to a play together. It was the way he had smiled when he saw her that did it... It was magical... She had a sense at that moment that she and he were connected in some mysterious way and would be together for life. Beth had had several other relationships before she met Randal. One of them had been serious. And yet, what she felt when she saw Randal was different. She couldn't explain it. But she trusted it. She knew it was right and she knew she had to submit to where it would lead... And now, years later, as Randall was living his last days most likely, Beth was being given the gift of this vivid memory. It was a little like she was experiencing those powerful feelings again, the exhilaration and the passion of those early days... What a gift...

4) Close by in another part of the hospital, there was Sandra sitting in a room holding Morris' hand... She had met Morris at a soup kitchen her church ran and where she volunteered from time to time. Morris had come in, all dirty, smelly and gruff. But once everyone was served and sitting around tables, Sandra and other volunteers made it a practice to sit and eat with the guests. She remembers making a deliberate decision to sit at Morris' table because of the initial revulsion she had felt when she first saw him. Once she got past that wall of revulsion, the dirt, grime and grit, the rough exterior of the man, she tried to engage him. She heard about a man who had been somebody, a child, a husband, a father... someone who had studied and worked... someone who had loved and lost... someone who had come to this country and been through some tough times... Someone who had lost his way, and yet... there was still a spark... As she was listening and asking questions, Sandra felt something inside... something warm and powerful, so powerful, in fact, she had to control her emotions... This man was special... he was a child of God... He was Christ calling to her...

Since that time, she stayed connected to Morris... Given his lifestyle, he had been in and out of hospital... There were times he had been absent for weeks and Sandra feared the worst... Finally, one day after weeks of his absence, Sandra decided to try to track him down. She feared the worst. It took a week of calls and drop ins at all downtown emergency rooms and shelter beds... Finally, she found him in hospital. After multiple, untreated conditions and self-abuse, Morris was dying... Seeing Morris so vulnerable, so shrivelled up, Sandra felt her heart breaking. She loved this man from a place deep inside. Why, how, she didn't understand, but she knew it was holy. She knew it was of God...

5) 2000 years ago, there was a community of people living in a large, multi-cultural city. These people came together to form a church. It wasn't easy. They were all so different. The way they were evaluated, criticized, measured, praised and put down out there in society infiltrated the way they treated each other in the church. Who had the gifts and talents? Who had the money and the status? Who had the spirituality which gave them the glow of holiness and sanctity? Who had sacrificed and risked for God and for humanity? Who had given away the most?

Their founding leader was very troubled by all this. His name was Paul. Even though he loved them, each and every one, and even though he saw such beautiful potential in them, each and every one, he also saw how their competitive and judgemental attitudes were destroying them. And so, he started writing them letters. In one letter, he tells them that they can have all the talents, gifts, money and imagined holiness in the world... they can make the greatest sacrifices and give the greatest gifts to others... But if they don't learn how to love one another, they have achieved nothing. Love is the most important thing, the one thing needful, the greatest thing of all...

And even though faith and hope are really important in order to achieve things, to succeed in life and to get close to God, love is the greatest of all. Why? Because love never ends. You can never exhaust love in a lifetime. Faith and hope are important for the journey. But once you arrive, you don't need faith and hope to get you there anymore. But love is different. It's like life. To be alive, really alive, is to love and be loved. Nothing else matters the same.

Love never ends because it's a journey that never ends. Paul tells his congregation that 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. Can we ever have enough patience? Can we ever have enough kindness? Have we totally overcome envy or boasting or arrogance or rudeness? Do we never insist on our own way? Are we never irritable or resentful? Have we never rejoiced when someone got what was coming to them? Have we always rejoiced in the truth? Do we bear all things with grace? Do we love people enough to believe in them all the time? Is our hope in love unshakeable? Can we endure what others do without despising them in some way?

Paul doesn't want them to be discouraged. He wants them to be on the right road, aiming for the right things, working their way toward growth. It doesn't matter whether they will ever achieve completion on the journey. They won't. Love never ends. But being on the right journey, having clarity as to the goal... it's richly fulfilling. To grow in love is to bring heaven and earth a little closer together. If they are to succeed as community, their greatest focus and goal must be love for one another.

It's one word – love. But as we have heard these different stories, we recognize how different love is depending on the relationships. Over the next many weeks, we will be exploring together different forms of love and how we may find God and be found by God through such love... “And now, faith, hope and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love...” Stay tuned... Amen.