

When my Mom died in 2014, I received a sympathy card from a friend, who is also a clergy colleague, and she wrote some words that gave me comfort: “Sorrow passes. Love never ends.” I’m coming up on 10 years since my Mom’s death this next November, which is a reasonable interval of time to have elapsed, that I might seek to evaluate the truth of my friend’s words. “Sorrow passes. Love never ends.” Is that so? What do you think? I feel that I will always experience some sorrow over my Mom’s death, but certainly the intensity has eased and the nature of the grief has changed. It’s probably fair to say that sorrow does pass or ease, at least to some degree, over time. But does the love remain? Is it *true* that love never ends? Because that’s what my friend wrote, and she was quite likely quoting St. Paul in our lesson from 1st Corinthians 13 this morning. It’s right there in verse 8: “Love never ends.” Without being able to explain this with complete logic or clarity, I *do* feel that I still love my Mom, and my Mom still loves me. I feel that the love between us still exists and is not lost or destroyed. How does this stack up against your experiences of loss and of love? Would you be inclined to agree that love never ends? If so, it’s one of a very few things of which that can be said. St. Paul lists only three such never-ending qualities: Faith. Hope. Love. And the greatest of these, he tells us, is love. Which never ends. It’s forever. *Forever* is an amazing concept, when we consider it carefully. But as one popular song puts it, “If love doesn’t last forever, tell me—what’s forever for?” I think it’s a fair question. Why would God make a forever, if love doesn’t last that long?

Of course, these are familiar words to us, these first 13 verses from 1st Corinthians 13. Even people with little familiarity with Scripture likely know these words, from hearing them read at countless weddings, if for no other reason. Let’s indulge in a little playful imagination for a moment, and let’s think about weddings in relation to arguably the two most prominent personages of our Christian faith: Jesus and Paul, the author of this morning’s text. Which would make the better wedding guest? Let’s take a survey. How many think Jesus? How many think Paul? Yeah, it’s a matter of opinion obviously, but I’d definitely go with Jesus. Alert worshipers and Scripture readers will recall the text from the Gospel of John in which Jesus turns water into wine at a wedding, at his Mother’s request, and really adds to the sweetness and joy of the occasion. Jesus

loved sharing meals and conversation and would make a wonderful wedding guest. Admittedly, we have no stories about Paul specifically as a wedding guest, but let's consider his overall attitudes towards marriage, as revealed in his letters. Paul was not a fan. He considered marriage a lesser evil than burning with desire and becoming promiscuous, but he really highly recommended celibacy. I find myself picturing Paul sitting at a wedding with a scowl on his face, and I very much doubt he ever tapped his spoon on his wine glass at the reception to encourage the newlyweds to kiss or bounded up to join in the bunny hop line.

Here, then, is the great irony: that this same Paul's words have become more closely associated with weddings and marital love than any other words in the world. God has a sense of humor, you know? But, in fairness to Paul and his original intentions, let's erase all of our wedding associations from these words for at least a *short* while in order to appreciate their *broader* significance as we consider this text this morning.

As we noted last week with our text from 1st Corinthians 1, Paul writes this letter from the city of Ephesus to the congregation in Corinth, around 55 AD. He had begun this Corinthian congregation a few years earlier, had stayed there for about 1 and ½ years, and then had moved on. But he is getting reports that the congregation is seriously divided and faltering. The issues appeared to be a competition of sorts among the members, as to who were the best Christians. Who had the greatest facility to speak in tongues or to prophesy? Who had the most faith? Who could give away the most and be the most philanthropic? Paul is attempting to walk a tightrope here. He is both wanting to affirm the spiritual gifts and active impulses of these believers, but at the same time, he wants to clarify what actually matters most and makes all the difference. He does so by writing these inspired words about love; not with weddings and bouquets and conga lines in mind at all, but with this polarized congregation in mind, that seems poised to implode because of their divisiveness.

Paul addresses these very issues of divisiveness and competition over spiritual gifts in the opening words of 1 Cor. 13. He tells the congregants that it doesn't matter how articulately and eloquently you speak. Even if you speak like an angel, if you do it without love, it's nothing. And it doesn't matter that you claim to have special knowledge, special prophetic information that no one else has received; or even if you can move mountains with your prophecy and faith, it all comes to *nothing* if there is no love. Finally, no matter

how willing you are to sacrifice yourself for your beliefs, even if you're willing to be burned alive as a martyr, it doesn't matter, if you act without love. Love makes all the difference within any form of human community, be it marriage or a family or a congregation or a nation or a world.

So, let's think about love for a moment. We've already recognized that Paul isn't speaking of romantic love. Love, for Paul, is a wide umbrella that covers many qualities of living that we value. It is far too multi-faceted to be described quickly or easily. Instead, Paul lists for us some of the things love *is* and some of the things love *isn't*.

Let's start with the negatives. What *isn't* love? Well, love *isn't* arrogant or boastful or envious or rude. Ouch. Does a day go by when we're not at least a little arrogant or boastful or rude or envious? Love *doesn't* insist on its own way; it is *not* irritable or resentful. Bigger ouch. I like to insist on my own way, and irritability and I are like buddies. Love does *not* rejoice in wrong-doing. Still not too good--don't we often feel just a tiny thrill of positive interest when we hear about someone else who has done wrong? "Do tell", we say to the bearer of such news. Or in the words of President Theodore Roosevelt's daughter, Alice, "If you can't think of something nice to say about anybody, come and sit by me." The tendency to find illicit pleasure in other's failures, mess-ups, and mistakes is a surprisingly common human pleasure. Based on this description, it would appear that there are many times in each day when we probably act outside of love's umbrella. That, I'm pretty sure, is what makes daily confession and forgiveness such a gift. Both with others and with God. Indeed, in contrast to that insipid quote from the Love Story movie of the 1970s, "Love means never having to say you're sorry", love actually means being *willing* to say you're sorry. If we lack the ability to acknowledge our failures and ask forgiveness for them, we will, in fact, become arrogant and rude and boastful over time, won't we? The exact qualities that Paul describes as loveless. And we will also find ourselves the frequent cause of dispute and conflict within our families, churches or communities, even if unintentionally. Paul knows what's up here. Becoming strident in our expression of faith, because we're so certain of our moral superiority and our rightness, never changes anyone else for the better and is destructive of faith community.

Richard Rohr, Christian mystic, priest and author, writes about what happens when we give in to delusions of spiritual superiority and arrogance and try to coerce people into faith by overwhelming them with our rules, as some in Corinth appear to have done. He states, “Just giving people commandments doesn’t change the heart. In the end, *Christianity is not a moral matter until it is first and foremost a mystical matter*. Commandments and laws may steel the will, but they do not soften the heart—or create soul—like one authentic personal encounter will do. Thus, we have produced an awful lot of “mean” Christians, which we must admit is Christianity’s present public image.” These words alarm me. Are “mean Christians” truly the present public image of the body of Christ? Those two words should never go together! Not in the sense of “mean” as being nasty and malicious, nor in the sense of “mean” as being meagerly and cheap. None of those are even remotely close to being Christ-like qualities and a Mean Christian should be a contradiction in terms. Mean Christians will not be a part of saving, redeeming, or healing anyone or anything. Only love can do those things.

So, let’s return to our text and see how Paul frames love in *positive* terms; having stated what love *isn’t*, what *is* love like? What kind of actions and behaviors fall within love’s umbrella? The first thing that Paul tells us is that love is patient and kind. Patience and kindness—no glamour there, but rather qualities that are as essential to daily living as food and water and oxygen. Where would any of us be without the patience and kindness of spouses or family members or friends or fellow church members or co-workers or strangers? Or God? One of the care facilities where I make visits has a placard in the elevator that reads, “Be kind—everyone you meet today is fighting a hard battle.” How true is that? We just don’t always know it. But we’re all a work in progress and you know what? Life is hard. It sometimes takes all our courage just to get up and face the day. In light of that often unacknowledged but so true reality, kindness and patience are definitely what are called for. How much it means to receive them from others. How blest we are to be able to give them to others. With kindness and patience, we are within love’s umbrella, building bridges instead of tearing them down.

Furthermore, Paul says, love rejoices in the truth. Well, some truths are hard to hear and accept, but love rejoices in them anyways, because love isn’t fragile. Love is strong. Which Paul acknowledges when he

continues, “Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.” There is a tough and enduring quality to love, and there must be. To bear heavy burdens when we are weary; to maintain belief when it would be easier to doubt; to hope when despair is far more appealing; and to just keep enduring when giving up is what you’d like to do---all these things are only possible with the strength of love in our lives, which is really the presence of God. This is the kind of love that only God can give and inspire. This is the kind of love that allows marriages, families, communities and congregations to work together for good. This is the kind of love that changes the world, a life at a time. And it doesn’t matter if it takes a while, because love *lasts*. Love lasts forever. That’s why God made forever. Love lasts, and Love can change the world. Our love, congregationally, finds expression in so many world changing ways: through our generosity to fighting World Hunger, for example, but also through volunteering at the food shelf, through donating to the Center for Changing Lives or the Bethany Crisis Shelter, through providing a ride for medical care for non-drivers, through putting on community dinners and picnics to welcome the stranger, through declaring every Sunday morning that the table of Lord welcomes everyone in love. All of that is life-changing, and therefore, world-changing. We rejoice to receive and extend that kind of love, the love of God. Love that is strong. Love that is kind. Love that never ends. Amen.