

Love Actually
I Corinthians 13:1-13
Fourth Sunday after Epiphany, (Feb. 3) 2019
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One of my favorites movies is the 2003 *Love Actually*, written and directed by Richard Curtis. It's about a variety of people in multiple situations in which love is lived out – young lovers, marriage, death and grief, a sister's love for her mentally ill brother in a mental health hospital, pre-adolescent love, old friends, and so on. By the end, we discover many of these stories are intertwined. The movie opens with scenes at the Arrivals gate of an airport in which various people greet and hug one another. The voiceover by actor Hugh Grant says, "Whenever I get gloomy with the state of the world, I think about the arrivals gate at Heathrow airport. General opinion makes out that we live in a world of hatred and greed but I don't see that. Seems to me that love is everywhere. Often it's not particularly dignified or newsworthy but it's always there. Fathers and sons, mothers and daughters, husbands and wives, boyfriends, girlfriends, old friends. When the planes hit the Twin Towers, none of the phone calls from people on board were messages of hate or revenge, they were all messages of love. If you look for it, I've got a sneaky feeling you'll find that love actually – is all around."

This morning the Apostle Paul tells us that love actually is what makes the church be the church. Love actually and not love theoretically. Love actually in flesh and blood and not love in our minds. Love actually here among us and not simply love in heaven. Paul tells them, and tells us, love is not so much what you feel – although that might be part of it – but it is what you do.

After going over how the church is not some sort of spiritual hierarchy but more like a body with various members each with gifts from God to practice together so the body functions – chapter 12, Paul says, “I have for you a more excellent way” (12:31).

I had been a pastor for about six months and already had a gun pulled on me over race, and had various other kinds of threats. I was scared, mad, and somewhat confused about what to do. Ernest Campbell was speaking at a conference in Dallas and I drove up to hear him. He was the recently retired pastor of the famous Riverside Church in NY City and was a great preacher, a scholar, and a prophet. At the end of his presentation, staff members were hustling him out the side door so he could catch his plane but I stood by the door with my copy of his book, *Locked in a Room with Open Doors*, in hand ready for him to sign. He paused to sign my book and I blurted out as fast I could that I was a new pastor and told him a little of my dilemma. He stopped in his tracks; people tugging on his sleeve to get him to hurry out, yet he gave me complete attention as if he had nothing else to do. He listened to me and then said, “Kyle, remember when the Apostle Paul faced the Corinthian church, he did not lambaste them or yell at them or shun them. He said to them, ‘I have a more excellent way for you.’ And then Paul told them of the way of love. Go back to your congregation and show them the more excellent way.” I’ve never forgotten what Ernest Campbell said.

Paul tells the Corinthians, in all their strife and division, there is a better way, a more excellent way. It is the way of love. And then for the next thirteen verses he shows them what love actually looks like: *No matter how much knowledge and insights to all the great mysteries I have, if I’m not loving, then I’m nothing... Love is patient – it gives up power and control; it gives up*

presuppositions and learns to listen. Love does not prejudge. Love is kind. Love is not envious. Love is not self-oriented, seeking love for self's sake. Instead, love is other oriented. Love lets others be who they are. Love gives others the space and support to be who God created them to be. Love looks outward, not inward. Love serves. Love gives. Love is truthful, not only in telling the truth but learning to listen to the truth, even if I don't like it. Love is relational, not private. Love, by its very nature, looks beyond itself to others and to the wider world. Love grieves when others are mistreated. Love gets angry at injustice. But love has faith and hope because in the end the only thing that lasts is love. Love that is rooted in God because all love ultimately comes from God (my loose paraphrase and interpretation).

Church is supposed to be the training camp in the ways of love. Here, among one another, in small ways mostly, and sometimes in big ways, we learn to love. We learn to love in our hearts – what Dorothy Day called the “revolution of the heart” and we learn to love outwardly. We practice, practice, practice love and always are learning that we do not know it all. Always we deepen in love and always we widen in love. And most always we learn that the love we are practicing is love rooted in Jesus Christ.

Indeed, one of the interesting things you might do to be reminded that Christ is the source, the means, and the goal of love is to go back into I Corinthians 13 and substitute the name Jesus in every place where the word love is printed. It works every time: Jesus is patient. Jesus is kind. Jesus is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. Jesus does not insist on his own way... etc.

What we do this morning when we gather around the Lord's Table and share in this sacred meal is practice love – to love God and to love one another. Here we are apprenticed in the school of love. Here we practice a most intimate ritual, eating and drinking Jesus himself into our very own bodies.

Baptism is a kind of marriage by which we give ourselves and immerse ourselves in Jesus Christ. In turn, Christ enters us and gives himself to us. Then, here at the Eucharist, Holy Communion, we become intimate with Christ and with Christ's body (one another, the church) once again. Here we become one flesh and blood with Christ and one another. We ingest the love of Christ so we can share this love with the wider world.

One of the best things we do together is sing. When we're on our game, we can sing hymns that can be heard out on Appleby Sand Road. I had an old civil rights activist tell me years ago when I lived in Atlanta, "You show me a church that sings, and I'll show you a church on the move."

I'm here to tell you that love is the power that enables us to sing. Love equips us to give ourselves to one another and to God in singing. Love sings.

There is a wonderful Swedish movie from 2004 called *As It Is in Heaven*. Set in a small Swedish village a few members of the church form a choir. Meanwhile a world-renowned musician and conductor, Daniel, returns to this small village, his hometown, because of health concerns, exhaustion, and emotional collapse. He is asked to come by the church for choir rehearsal, listen, and give a few pointers.

Of course, he is drawn in. But this small choir is full of dissension, rivalry, and distrust. They don't know how to be together in ways that nurture and inspire each other to be better than they could be if they remain alone. Daniel tells the choir members that everything begins with listening. So he begins with different practices that help them learn to turn off their cell phones, put their distractions aside, and learn to listen to each other. In one scene, they all lie down on the floor listening and massaging each other's bellies so they can feel each other's breathing. Another time, they are in a circle holding hands and humming. He wants them to hear each other's voices and find where they are in relation to each other. He tells them that they cannot sing together if they are not listening to each other, even feeling the vibrations of each other through the intimacy of touching bodies and shared breathing. For a symphony of sound to emerge, they must first learn to be deeply sympathetic to each other.

Now, I'm not going to get you on the floor and have you listen to each other's breathing. And I don't think, though I could be wrong, that Miki will have the choir massaging each other's bellies in rehearsal. But I am here to help you love God, love one another, and go out into the world sharing that love.

So this morning, we listen to one another and to God, we pray, we sing, and we take Christ into our lives at this Table. We love.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. One True God, Mother of us all. Amen.