

The pedagogy of love

*Sermon preached by the Rev. F. M. "Buddy" Stallings, Vicar,
at the eleven o'clock service, January 31, 2010: The Fourth Sunday After the Epiphany.
Based on 1 Corinthians 13:1-13.*

“If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal.” Nine out of ten wedding couples choose to have Paul’s famous words from the 13th chapter of First Corinthians read at their marriage ceremony. And who can blame them? These world-class words of poetry are some of the most beautiful ever written, not just in the Bible but in all literature. Sadly, though, like so many words about love, they also have inspired some of the most insipid, the sappiest sermons I have ever heard. My deepest fear is that I have given a couple of them. In weddings where everyone is so beautiful, when the flowers bloom, and the music soars, sentimentalizing this encomium of love is almost irresistible—even in cases when clearer minds might have hesitated.

In one or two instances—certainly not here—when the couple chose to have the love chapter read, only the fact that I am extremely over-socialized kept me from saying, “Are you kidding me?” I was not sure they even liked each other, much less loved one another. And frankly I could understand why. And, yet, the marriage train had long since left that station—they were getting married. The best I could hope for—which isn’t all bad—was that the sacrament of marriage and the hearing of these lofty ideals might have the power to convert, that these words could be in themselves transformational for them. Stranger things have happened, for such is the power of this passage and the power of the sacramental life.

In a way that is how Paul used this writing—to convert, to teach, to transform. He was not talking about the kind of intimate love we associate with this chapter. In fact, as is true for most scripture, he was addressing a particular problem in the

emerging church. The new Christians in Corinth, apparently quite a rowdy group, were in trouble. Their enthusiasm about the Good News of the Gospel had led not to harmony but disagreement about how best to respond to this news, disagreement over which spiritual gifts were closest to the heart of God. Some claimed that the gift of tongues, a variety of religious ecstatic language, was the greatest; others argued that prophecy clearly was what was most important. Faith, others insisted, was at the top of the gift pile, faith big enough to move mountains. Surely that was it. But wait. What about generosity, the biggest givers wanted to know. Certainly to give away all of one’s possessions would take the prize. The community was deeply splintered, tugged in one good direction after another. There is nothing more potentially self-righteous than the newly minted convert.

Can we imagine a church being in such a mess? Well, of course, we can. And worse. Good often competes against other versions of good. It is part of what makes life so complicated and wonderful. Preservation of this marvelous building, a space so rich both culturally and spiritually, is critical. It is our highest order; it must be preserved. But imagine how many more people could be housed and fed if we expanded our Community Ministry. “Feed my sheep,” Jesus said. And what about our music program? Already transcendent, what could it be with more and more resources? But education and formation of our children and ourselves must be at the heart of what we do. That must be where we begin. How else can we be prepared to live the lives to which we are called? But are we bold enough in our support of justice issues? Our church needs to be a place where the causes of justice are taught,

a place where we are mobilized to action. Oh, my. I know people in each of these camps; even more astonishing is the truth that given the right set of circumstances, I can passionately argue for any one of these positions. Indeed we know this struggle and not just with one another; we know it in our own hearts.

All of a sudden an ancient text most often revered for its beauty in marriage ceremonies has relevance for us. Paul used this extravagant language less to make the Corinthians swoon than to rein them in, to set them straight, to remind them of what their (and our) true purpose in the world is: to love.

Paul never claimed that these activities or pursuits were bad or without worth; he simply said that without love they did not mean much. An exquisitely restored building with no heart for the poor is beautiful but incomplete; a ministry that only serves the poor without regard to feeding the souls of those who worship and are served here through art, music and architecture can become arid and self-righteous. And on and on we can go. A lasting message from Corinthians is that each is important and none is the main. Using the notion of the body again, Paul's claim is that each is needed and important.

But the chapter does not end there. Paul, not unknown to arrogance himself, has the audacity to describe love, dares to name its characteristics. In all likelihood he was employing irony in this portion, describing the attributes of love, which as he saw it were in sharp contrast to how his readers were acting. It is a way of saying, "You people have been acting like jerks" without directly saying it. It sometimes works. Whether it did or did not in this instance, it gives us pause to contemplate how and when our lives are characterized by love and how and when they are not.

"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." Wow. Remember that Paul was not describing love as a reality just between lovers but as the definitive distinction of what it means to be a follower of Christ and as the most important factor in building up the body of Christ, which we call the church. It is impossible for me to read these attributes of love without being caught up short—my impatience, my delight in being right and my snippiness when I am not, or when in my view others fail to realize that I am. It is not pretty.

Of course, if we translate these qualities of love, these ideals of love as prescriptive, codifying them into another list by which to judge ourselves, we are likely to become either resentful or guilty, which often is the same emotion. In the process we almost certainly will miss the joy that inculcating these principles into our living can bring. At the same time, however, viewing them simply as lovely ideals that we can take or leave is not the answer either. Attempting in a serious way to somehow understand and emulate the life of Jesus requires that we grapple with what it means to be loving, to love. Certainly it is complicated, but that struggle, Paul says, is the defining activity of one who seeks to know and follow Jesus. When all else is said and done, nothing is more important: love is our reason for being here. Remember the immortal words of William Blake: "We are put on earth a little space, that we may learn to bear the beams of love."

And finally we hear Paul's claim that "love never ends." I think what he meant is that when we love, we engage the eternal; we touch something in us and in another that changes us and him or her forever. Even when love turns to something else, and on occasion we know that it does, the love that was there lasts forever. We can't take back love. We can stop loving—sometimes for good and healthy reasons and sometimes for reasons less clean and right and usually for a mixture of both. But however it is that love is interrupted or changed, the love we once knew is still there somewhere inside us.

Every person I have ever loved still has a little spot in my heart; some of them have big spots. Even when I sometimes think in retrospect, "what on earth was I thinking," even then, the love I felt is forever. For those of us who have lived through the trauma of failed vows, promises that could not be kept, loves that could no longer give life, we know that love—however marred—lingers in its own category, one we neither need to nor can fully understand. Simply wanting and praying for the best for one we once loved is a way of continuing to honor vows previously made—even if we want that best for him or her to occur on the other side of the continent.

"Love never ends." I preached at a memorial service yesterday and was reminded so poignantly

of this extravagant claim. Love is the key to our immortality. Life after death is utterly provable in our own hearts and souls. We know that the one or ones we love so tenderly do not die. Of course, they stop breathing; they no longer walk and talk with us in ways that are easily definable. But they are with us forever, so essentially with us as to be part of us. Love keeps them alive even as it keeps us alive.

"If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal."

In the name of God: Amen.

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