

WHAT'S LOVE GOT TO DO WITH IT?

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1 Corinthians 13:1-13

Our passage for today is one that is commonly read at weddings. (You remember what a wedding is, don't you?) This passage is popular at weddings because it speaks of love. The word love appears nine times in this passage. And a wedding, after all, is the celebration of the love between two people. Verse 4 of our reading is a Hallmark card in its own right: *Love is patient; love is kind*. This is the love that we celebrate; this is the love that we desire.

So, it may surprise you that marriage was the last thing on Paul's mind when he wrote these words. He was not writing to two people in love; he was writing to a congregation that was deeply divided and on the verge of falling apart.

As a missionary, Paul founded a Christian worshiping community in the city of Corinth.

In Paul's day, the city of Corinth was a Roman colony. Because of its location on a narrow strip of land between two seas, it was an important and prosperous trading center. Its population is estimated to have been between 100- and 600,000. It boasted a diverse population of Romans, Greeks, and people from the East. These inhabitants brought with them their many gods and Corinth had no shortage of shrines and idols. One scholar has described Corinth as "intellectually alert, materially prosperous, and morally corrupt."¹

Paul arrived in Corinth and gathered people together. He taught them about Jesus Christ. He forged a community. And then he moved on to another mission opportunity. Time has passed since his departure and Paul has received word that there are troubles brewing in the Corinthian congregation. There are divisions among the members. And these divisions are numerous.

For example, there is the matter of communion. For the church at that time, communion was celebrated as an actual meal. Not a shared meal, but a brown bag affair in which the people brought their own food to eat. The problem was that the wealthy would bring sumptuous picnics of lobster and caviar while the poor had peanut butter sandwiches. This obvious disparity was a source of contention in the church.

¹ *The First Epistle of Paul to the Corinthians* ("The Tyndale New Testament Commentaries" Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1958), p. 17.

There was also another matter regarding food. Some in the church considered it okay to purchase meat that had previously been sacrificed to pagan idols. Others in the church objected to this practice.

On top of that, members of the church were bringing lawsuits against one another. They were also split over which evangelists to follow. We even read of some matters of sexual immorality. It's a wonder Paul didn't wash his hands of the whole group and just walk away.

But he didn't. He stuck with them. And even though he could not be with them in person, he maintained a correspondence of which First and Second Corinthians are two out of at least four letters that Paul wrote to this congregation. In his correspondence, Paul does all he can to heal the divisions and keep the church together. Like an attorney, he builds his case—a case which culminates in our reading for today, a case that culminates in Paul's plea to the people to live in love.

In English, we have just one word for love. We also have words such as passion, fondness, care, like, but there is really only one 'love.' In the Greco-Roman world of Paul's day, there were several word choices for love that convey its meaning according to its context. There is the word *philia* which describes a close friendship. The city of Philadelphia was named by its founder William Penn as the city of brotherly love. This name comes from *Philo* for love and *adelphos* for brother.

There is *storge* which is the love we have for family—the primal, protective love of a parent for a child. There is *eros* which describes sexual passion, the root of our word erotic.

And then there is the love that Paul calls the Corinthians to strive toward—agape. Agape is a deep, willful, sacrificial, unconditional, self-giving love. In Latin, the word is translated *caritas* and forms the root of our word charity. CS Lewis described agape as “gift love.” Paul calls the people of Corinth to set aside their differences and demonstrate their agape for one another.

Another issue at play in this church was an underlying competition of who was the best Christian in the church. Some members were clearly trying to outdo others. For example, there was the matter of speaking in tongues. Apparently, it was all the rage. If one wants to demonstrate how spiritual they are, then speaking in tongues is the key. The more, the better. However, tongue speaking had become a disruptive force within the congregation. Paul's solution is to root tongue-speaking in a foundation of love. Paul writes these words to the Corinthians: *If I speak in the language of mortals or the language of angels, but do so without agape, I am nothing more than a noisy gong.*

He goes on to say the same about those who claim prophetic powers and even those who make generous donations to help the needy. These acts, no matter how

well-intentioned, unless they are rooted in agape, have little meaning or purpose in the Christian life.

So, what is it that makes agape so special? For us, we think of love as a noun. Love is a thing. Love is a good feeling, a special bond, an attachment to someone. But for Paul, love is much more. Agape is a verb, and not any verb, but an action verb. In fact, in Paul's world, love is like an action hero like Bruce Willis, or Arnold, or Sigourney Weaver chasing aliens through space—people who will go to any length to do what needs to be done. According to Paul, *agape-love is patient; it is kind; it 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.*

Paul is not employing abstract adjectives here. He is calling upon action verbs. Agape means to be patient, to act kindly, to rejoice, to bear, to believe, to hope, to endure. Agape is powerful. Paul offers 15 action verbs to describe just how powerful love can be.

Furthermore, agape love is eternal. Those other spiritual gifts such as prophecy, tongue speaking, knowledge of the mysteries of God, these will all come to an end. But love will outlast them all. Love will last forever.

What Paul is proposing to this conflicted church is that they engage in a radical communal love. They need to shift from putting their own priorities first and instead seek to put others ahead of themselves. Paul is asking the people to imagine life in a community where each person truly cares for the others, to live the love that Christ told us is the acting out of God's love for this world. They need to live God's love. They need to live a new reality, a new possibility, a new kingdom. They need to love like an action hero.

Finally, Paul explains that changing their church will not happen overnight. They can't flip a switch and make it all better. No, this change requires that they grow and mature. As Paul explains, when he was a child, he acted like a child, he spoke, thought, and reasoned as a child would do. What we don't know here is if Paul is talking about when he was actually a child, or if he's referring to the time before he knew Christ when he was a spiritually immature. It doesn't matter because either way, to think like he does now, requires time and growth and experience and maturity. To be a Christian requires a transformation that continues our entire life. Paul is telling the people that they will need time to mature as well. Presently, they view the world as if it is reflected in a mirror. On a historical note, there mirrors would have been a piece of shiny metal that gave a less than perfect reflection. Their understanding of faith would be like that imperfect reflection. But one day, Paul promises, if they learn to love, they will see a perfect image just as if they are speaking face to face with God.

As I mentioned, Paul did not write this chapter intending it to become a wedding liturgy. But since we do read it at weddings, there is no reason we can't apply agape to our relationships. We should. A marriage has a better chance of survival if the partners successfully set aside their own selfishness and replace it with a sacrificial and giving love. As the old joke says, "Marriage is when a man and a woman become as one. The trouble starts when they try to decide which one."

The author Louis de Bernieres, in his novel *Captain Corelli's Mandolin* has a father explaining to his daughter about love. She has fallen in love with a dashing army officer and the father offers words to her that convey his lifetime of experience. He starts off by saying, "When you fall in love, it is a temporary madness. It erupts like an earthquake, then it subsides." He tells her more about love, but ends with these wonderful words, "Love itself is what is left over, when being in love has burned away."

To be a Christian is not to pray the hardest or work the hardest or sing the loudest or speak in tongues or any other outward expression. To be a Christian is to love, to love when being in love has burned away. To love forever, not just for a moment. That is what we are called to do. Amen.