

Nice text: 1 Corinthians 13

Sunday's Coming Premium

June 17, 1998

When 1 Corinthians 13 crosses my path, I don't greet it with a great deal of enthusiasm. Beautiful, lyrical, significant though it may be, all I need to hear is: "If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels" and I'm gone. I am usually deep in the midst of my own thoughts by the time the speaker reaches "Love is patient and kind." This passage is lost in the netherworld of those things we hear too much; for me it is clichéd, trifling and lifeless.

Several years ago a dear cousin asked me to read scripture at his wedding. I remember telling my brother and sister-in-law that as long as I wasn't reading 1 Corinthians 13, I was confident I could read well. Then I offered a comic rendering of the passage and got quite a few laughs.

The joke was on me. When we arrived at the church, my cousin thrust the 1 Corinthians text into my hands and rushed off. I was left to make my peace with the words that I had treated with such indignity. I determined to read without making eye contact with my brother and sister-in-law and to read the text in a way that would hold the congregation's attention and help them to hear it anew. And, feeling sheepish about my impudence, I determined to give the text another chance myself.

I often hear 1 Corinthians when I marry couples who like to feel they are "religious" without being committed to a particular institution. This text becomes not only their statement on love, but also the primary representation of the tradition to which they have some lingering relation. They may be unsettled with the Christian tradition, but they are very comfortable with this text. It's so "nice."

But we should not be comfortable with this text. Paul's words on love should make us deeply uneasy, because they tell us that the most important thing about being Christian is the most difficult, and the most demanding. We need to wrestle with this text, and to wrestle with it without ceasing. If we do not wrestle with this text when it crosses our path, then it is likely that we have lost a sense of the love that is the foundation of Christian life.

Paul did not have a wedding in mind when he penned the letter to the Corinthians. He had been to Corinth and worked to establish a church there. Now he was responding to a letter from that fledgling church--a letter that raised questions about the foundations of the Christian life and faith. In Paul's absence from Corinth, debate and confusion had developed about the importance of the various spiritual gifts that were manifest among the believers.

At first Paul indulges the Corinthians in a patient discussion celebrating the gifts of prophesy, tongues, faith and charity. He acknowledges these gifts as signs of vitality, as faculties that benefit the church when exercised within it. "Yes, earnestly desire these spiritual gifts," he says, then adds, "but in the end there is a more excellent way." There is something far more important. There is a gift that the believers may all share: love.

Of the various forms of love that Christian scripture makes known to us, the one that Paul discusses is the love among human beings. The word agape, as we know, signifies moral love--charity, fellowship, good will and friendship. Paul does not take up here the commandment to love God; he does not speak of adoration or attachment, passion or affection. Paul speaks instead of a spiritual bond, a spiritual unity that will make the Corinthians a church. He speaks of a love that will draw the Corinthians out of loneliness and self-centeredness and into a unity with fellow believers and with God. It is this unity that bears, believes, hopes and endures all things.

In the Christian community, he says, the only good is the public good, because we are bound inexorably to each other. Our well-being is bound to the well-being of one another. I owe you. Not because I like you. Not because you have been kind to me or favored me in any way. But because we are one.

When we think of love, we believe we've heard it all before. We think that when 1 Corinthians 13 comes sailing along in the lectionary, we are brave to preach it, because there is not a new nor an interesting thing that can possibly be said about love. But we need to take our time with this good word, because in so many ways it is beyond our frail, imperfect grasp. This is not love as a personal, private acquisition--the love which makes us feel safe, cherished, valued and warm. This is not love the commodity. It is love the action; love the response; love the witness, the sacrifice, the offering. Because we are not very good at this kind of love, we can never hear this text too often.

The older I get the more disheartened I am by the temptation to turn inward. We secure a mate, a vocation, a home, a community; we recognize that if we maintain a handful of strong and vital friendships we are lucky. We seem to grow more insular, more personal and more protective. My property, my children, my savings, my family, my retirement. Things begin to move unhaltingly in that direction and our culture celebrates it, rewards it, calls it "success."

If you try to resist--to mention the possibility of not having children, of not starting a retirement account, or of wanting to live in cooperative community--it's regarded as "unnatural," "alternative" at best. The dominant story persuades us that the most important things are our hopes and dreams. We move to domesticate love--to tuck ourselves safely inside our marriages and partnerships, our families, our parishes. Our private relations are precious to us, and they should be. But they do not make us a church. Paul does not speak to us of the love that is our birthright. He speaks of the love that is our responsibility.

Paul tells the Corinthians that they will succeed at being a Christian community that witnesses to the love of God when they feel bound to one another with love. Bound by responsibility and commitment, with patience and kindness. If we take Paul at his word, we may have a church of enormous size, with measureless gifts counted among that church's members. Yet if those members are not bound to one another with love, it isn't worth a hill of beans. If we make the church at Corinth a metaphor for the Christian life, then we should say to the fledgling Christian: "Yes! Cultivate knowledge, faith and charity; learn and march and pray and donate. But if you fail to heed your fellow human beings with a loving heart, it means nothing. You can be an individual of enormous learning, insight and talent, and without love you are a clanging gong or a noisy cymbal." What an extraordinary word this is. Not only does Paul exalt love among the virtues, he makes it the condition of all the rest.

This kind of love comes far less naturally to us than the personal love we feel we earn and then coddle. We need to wrestle unceasingly with this message because this kind of love is perfect and we are imperfect. We are all fledgling Christians. We will never secure our ability to love in the way we are asked to love. So we have to make a commitment to it over the long haul.

The love that is patient and kind, not jealous or boastful, arrogant or rude, does not belong to us. It takes constant work. It is like the spiritual discipline that we sit down to every morning or every evening, because we know it requires practice. I struggle

to sit quietly and pray and do yoga each morning because I know that if I don't I'm too easily distracted. It is too easy to live my life inattentive to what I hold most important. Paul speaks of love the labor, the exercise, the discipline. It is our calling to pay witness to it regularly, out loud, with intention.

This is not necessarily the kind of love we want to be reminded of on a wedding day or any other day. It distracts us from the building up of ourselves. Yet I have no qualms about letting this text be the chief representation of Christianity at weddings: there's no more important thing for a Christian to do than to become a teacher of this difficult and demanding love.

While sitting on a bus one day I looked out the window and saw a man sitting on a bench. His body covered two key letters in the slogan printed on the back of the bench: "Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ and you will be ----ved," I read. I imagined that the message did not read: "you will be saved," but rather "you will be loved." I believe this is what Paul wanted for the Corinthians: a church where our efforts, our works, our attentions are focused not on saving anything or anybody, but on loving with our hearts wide open.

Let us have the courage, the will and the stamina to keep practicing what our imperfect knowledge will never grasp. Let us have the patience and the desire to hear this text over and over again, not as a pretty lullaby, but as our marching orders.