

LOVE

1 Corinthians 13: 1 – 12

February 1, 2004

Have you heard the story about the mature couple who were working very hard at staying in good health? The husband liked a game of golf once in a while (it's a bit pricey to do too often) and they took a walk nearly every day. The wife made sure that they ate healthy meals – a bran muffin and orange juice every morning and their five to ten servings of fruits and vegetables each day. They kept an eye on fat intake and measured their cholesterol. They were very conscientious but unfortunately one day they ended up in a car accident and perish. Soon they find themselves at the pearly gates where St. Peter welcomes them with open arms and offers to take them on a tour of heaven. St. Peter takes them first to the banquet hall where long tables are spread with every food under the sun – chocolate mousse and buckets of ice cream and pecan pie (a few of my favourites!)

“There is food here for you whenever you are hungry so please help yourselves. Often we have great feasts where we all get together to dine and enjoy one another's company.”

“And what is the charge for all this,” the husband asked.

“Oh,” said St. Peter, “there is no charge. This is yours to enjoy.”

The couple looked at one another in amazement. Then St. Peter discovered that they enjoyed golfing so he took them to a magnificent 36 hole golf course with smooth greens and lovely hills. Peter showed them the club house and where the golf carts were and they even had golf clubs for use.

“Well, this is lovely,” the man said, “but it must be very expensive to golf here.”

“Oh no,” exclaimed St. Peter. “This is all here for your pleasure with no charge.”

At this point, the man turned to his wife.

“If you hadn't insisted on taking such good care of us, we could have been here years ago!”

Taking care of one another is one expression of the love that the apostle Paul, in his letter to the church in Corinth, praises as “the greatest gift of all.” In one way, love is commonplace, unexceptional. Love binds together not only couples who are married, but also parents and children, grandparents and young ones, co-workers, neighbours and friends. Love is the gift that causes us to care about one another, to reach out from beyond our self-occupation to focus on the well-being of another. Love pulls us into sacrificing our own comfort for the sake of another’s need. Love leads us to acts of costly, patient service. Love happens everyday, in many ways, and yet it is not only our most precious gift, it is the way of life we have through Jesus.

Today I want to focus on the expression of love found within the intimate covenant of marriage. Quality relationships are a gift to congregation and community, something we all benefit from.

There are three aspects of Paul’s hymn to love that are central to our understanding:

- Love is the ground of meaning
- Love requires the formation of character
- All our knowledge is partial therefore humility is part of love.

Over the years I have spent a lot of time with people who are in grief as they plan a funeral for someone they love.

It strikes me over and over that as people reflect on life and the meaning of life, they talk over and over of love.

Oh yes, they will tell me about a person’s accomplishments and the things they are proud of.

But the bottom line is always the relationship they have shared and the ways in which they received the gift of love and shared the gift of love.

So often, as people make their goodbyes with one who is dying, their last words are: I love you.

Our attachments to one another are a deep and basic way that God helps us become human, fully alive.

At the end of life, as at its beginning,

love is what makes sense of everything.

It is the ground of meaning.

As we hear in 1 John 4:

“Dear friends, let us love one another,
because love comes from God.

Whoever loves is a child of God and knows God.

Whoever does not love does not know God,
for God is love.” (1 John 4: 7, 8)

As we love, we not only learn about another person,
or rejoice in another person,
we experience God.

That is a profound reality.

Paul reminds the Corinthians that although they may have
many gifts for worship and ministry,
unless they have the gift of love,
other accomplishments are without value.

So love is the ground of meaning in our lives,
the criterion by which we can assess all that we do.
But love is much more than an emotional experience.
Love is something we can learn,
something we can grow stronger at,
something that requires the forming of character,
the practicing of habits,
the cultivation of attitudes and ways of being.

Nurturing a long-term relationship like marriage
is a school for learning to love!

Whatever we learned about love in our childhood families
will be challenged in a hundred new ways as we share life with
another person.

Partners need to learn how to balance the needs and desires of both
parties.

Some of us need to learn how to practice caring behaviours
like putting down the newspaper to listen and look at the same time
or allowing a partner time alone when first coming home from work.
Some of us need to stretch to understand the partner's interests –
like Super Bowl football or the joys of chatting on the phone!

Add children into the mix and you can earn a university degree in the school of love!

With so many opportunities around us, we can develop our capacity to care about another even while we listen to our own deepest needs and desires.

We may never reach the heights of which Paul talks:

“love is not jealous or conceited or proud; love is not ill-mannered or selfish or irritable...”

but that is what love looks like;

that is the love that God offers us.

Sharing life with another person will take us through many unexpected events,

many stresses and losses as well as celebrations.

It is not easy to stay well-connected with one another.

Often we will fall short of Paul’s description in our marriages and our friendships

but this gives us something to aim for, something to practise

until we realize we can love without having to work so hard at it!

So love is the ground of meaning.

At the end of our lives, love is what will matter the most.

Secondly, in learning to love, God helps us build character and increase our capacity to love.

Finally, love keeps us humble.

As wise as we may be, as much knowledge as we may have, as eloquent and polished as we may sound, none of that is significant if we do not love.

The ability to love is not related to our education or worldly experience.

Very simple people are capable of great love while many who are sophisticated, struggle.

Human knowledge is always partial.

There is always something about another person, something about our spouse,

we do not know –

there is always something new to discover if we are humble.

For one thing, we have never been this age before –

I can discover how my spouse is experiencing life now, in this time, at this stage of his life, his career, our family.

I recall a sad story that my teacher of counseling once told about a couple he was doing marital therapy with:

At one point the husband compared his wife to a book – a book he had already read and had no more interest in.

No wonder the marriage was in trouble!

This spouse had no humility, no openness to discover, to deepen, to take delight, to reread and appreciate, to keep writing the book.

We rejoice with those today who renewed their marriage vows.

May God bless you with new discoveries about one another, with new resources for your lives and their challenges, with new joys to share.

We give thanks for all who, through a whole variety of relationships, strengthen our capacity to love another.

May God's blessing be on your love.

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