

I know a couple marrying in a few months- maybe you know them, too (it's Dusty and Kern)- so I guess I could consider this the wedding sermon. After all, how many times have we heard these verses read at wedding ceremonies? It's very familiar to us: and it's all very false- that is, the idea that the words of Paul's "love chapter" are directed to persons in love. When we hear these affirmations about love- or we might say, these demands about doing love- let us not think they are meant for persons who love one another, but for those who dislike each other- or who disagree- or for those who think they are somehow more worthy.

Really, it's easy to love if we already love, and to love those kind to us, or as Frank Burns said once in an episode of MASH, "It's nice to be nice to the nice." But to love those who are mean to you, and who belittle and take advantage of you is near to impossible; it's harder to love those you don't want to love and yet, the Apostle commands it. He understands the situation in the Corinthian church, like so many other churches we've known about, where the wealthy get their way and those with influence lead or rule as tyrants, and where the poor and less advantaged are blamed and stigmatized and left outside the circle of fellowship. If we read 1

Corinthians closely, we can see that to be the case. And Paul's solution is the liberal application of humble, caring love.

Now, there is nothing wrong with using these verses as a beautiful poem of encouragement for the wedding couple, or for a Valentine's or anniversary card. But taking scripture out of its context is always dangerous: we miss the real meaning of it. And the context for 1 Corinthians is the arrogance of those church members who were better educated, better provided for, and who seemed to think their cultural privilege extended to their relationships within the church. It was obvious, surely anyone could see it! God himself had blessed them with all their things and with spiritual knowledge and deep insight. And so, they loved their speaking in tongues and their "well-deserved" authority and places of leadership, and the fact that everybody else had to listen to them. These abilities Paul calls spiritual gifts- tongue-speaking, church administration, and the like- though he puts them far down the list in importance.

In chapter 12, Paul had compared the church to the human body- both made up of many, different members and parts. Different yes, he said, but all essential. It isn't a complete body without all its parts. And the church isn't complete unless each member is at work exercising his or her spiritual gift. And so, the purpose of

chapter 13 is to show us that our gifts can only work together as we use and share them *in loving*. Each person is necessary; all our gifts combined make the church whole and complete. And loving one another makes the church unified.

According to Paul, some gifts are more important, the “higher gifts,” he calls them. That makes sense- using the body analogy, an eyeball, the spine, the pancreas, are more important than a toe, or hair. But the church needs every part and every gift. We may speak sometimes about how we are called: that God calls us to faith, calls us to a particular place or church, to a particular kind of service. And one part of that call is the talent we are given, or the package of spiritual gifts God gives to each of us. Yes, some gifts are more meaningful- look at the Old Testament reading, the call of Jeremiah as minister and prophet to Israel and to all the nations. What was his gift? The gift of prophecy, or preaching. A higher gift, and a hard one: Jeremiah’s life, one of loneliness and depression, the slander and the physical suffering that came with his gift. He makes me think of a line I recently read that, “The hero doesn’t get the reward; the hero pays the price.” Certainly, Jeremiah and his demanding call are proof of that. Of course, I do not consider my call to ministry to be as high as his, nor so harsh or so significant. But my call and my gifts are important- in this church and in my relationships and in

the other communities of my life. And so are your gifts and your call. We need one another, and we need all our gifts.

Our gifts are complimentary and they unite us. And this is how we are united: as we use our gifts by loving. This chapter shows us that the real purpose of spiritual gifts is never for pleasing ourselves, nor are they for finding ourselves, but only this: for making others' lives better. Our spiritual gift is not the "finishing touch" that completes a well-rounded life, but rather, as gifts are used and practiced in love, they make friendship and fellowship possible, so that we are more nearly complete as we join together in community and share love.

One author has written that Paul isn't saying love is another gift, not even a higher or better gift, but rather that love is the "manner by which our gifts work properly together." It helps me to think of it this way, that love is not a gift given as talents and abilities are given to us, but that *love is a gift we choose to do*. Certainly, the greatest gift we have is God's decision to love us. So let us choose to love others, and thus, show them God's love. That can be our gift to them. Let us love without holding back, each other in this room, our neighbors, and all the people we may sometimes catch ourselves thinking don't really matter so much. But they matter to God. Maybe that's their gift to us: they remind us, these

inconvenient people, that God's love is without limit, and so neither should our love be; they teach us that we must keep on choosing love. In the end, the gift that matters, far more than preaching or speaking in tongues or spiritual knowledge, is the patience and compassion and humility that come from love. These connect us to each other and make us one with God.

Here is thing about the love chapter. We already know this about love. There is nothing surprising here. This is not some new teaching, not something that Christianity alone possesses. Everybody knows everything this passage teaches about love: that we owe one another neighborliness, kindness, compassion. Paul wrote this because the people recently converted to a new God, believing in a new Lord, experiencing a new sense of joy and meaning in their lives and new ways of expressing faith, had also kept some of the old human failings, like pride and selfishness; and they needed to be reminded that over all was the necessity of loving one another, and that their new-found spiritual gifts could never substitute for love. There is no substitute for love. But we already know this; the challenge is that *we simply must never let ourselves believe there are times when it's ok not to love*. That is the lesson we must keep calling to mind, whenever we are tempted

to give ourselves permission to stop loving anybody. After all, God has never stopped loving us.