

A seminary professor was known for preaching so eloquently on the topic of *love* that he was invited to preach in multiple congregations around the same area. One couple was so touched by the sermon that they approached him after the service was over and asked that he might speak with their nineteen year old daughter whom they describe as an “alcoholic and out of control.” The professor agreed to meet with her and was able to make an assessment on their first visit. He said, “When I first saw her, I thought, ‘Young lady, if you’re feeling alright, would you please tell your face.’” She was totally unhappy with a very negative attitude.

The story goes that they met several times, and each time the professor became more convinced that the young woman’s problem was that she was completely self-absorbed... indeed, he described her as the most self-centered person he had ever met. Finally, one day, he confronted her with her self-absorption. He said, “You know what you need? You need a Copernican revelation. You need to know the world doesn’t revolve around you. You live in a world whose population is one.” The girl stomped out of his office and never came back.

About a month later, the professor met a psychiatrist who had come for a lecture at the seminary, so he quizzed the psychiatrist, “How do you get someone to love, not to be self-centered?”

The psychiatrist asked him why he asked such a question, and the professor told the story of the young woman.

The psychiatrist replied to him, “I don’t think you can get people to love. It’s a decision of the will and a commitment. People must decide to love and commit themselves to it,

or they'll never do it. But if you really wanted to help that young lady to love, if you wanted to help her do that, you went about it the wrong way.”

The two went back and forth for a few more minutes.

The psychiatrist asked the professor, “Have you ever had a toothache?”

“Yes,” the professor replied.

“And what did you think about,” the psychiatrist asked.

“Well, I thought about me.”

“And what else?”

“I thought about finding a dentist.”

“That’s right,” the psychiatrist responded. “When you are in pain, you cannot think about other people. You think about your pain and how to find someone to help. And the girl came to you thinking, ‘Maybe this person can help me, and so she came out from behind the mask and revealed herself to you. And she *is* selfish because she is hurting so much. Someone has given her such a bad image of herself that she reflects that image and it comes out as selfish, uncaring and worthless. She’s just playing the role they gave her. And she doesn’t come to church, not because she doesn’t want to, but because she thinks if she does that God might say to her, ‘What are *you* doing here.’ And you said you didn’t like her either.”

“I never said that,” replied the professor.

“Oh, you didn’t? When you said, ‘You need a Copernican revelation. Your world has a population of one.’ You didn’t have to say, ‘I don’t like you.’”¹

Have you ever been tempted to say something like that?

¹ Frank Pollard, *How to Do Love in Great Preaching 1999*, Mark Johnson, ed. (Preaching Resources, Jackson TN, 1999) pp39-40 (edited by author for brevity and clarity)

I confess that I have. I was worse than tempted. Recently I wrote one of those seemingly soul-satisfying screeds that we all want to write from time to time. And then I hit *send*.

It felt exhilarating for about ten seconds. Then I realized what I'd done.

Have you ever done that?

I immediately followed up with another note, apologizing to my colleagues and asking them to forgive me for my rather uncharitable characterization of someone who had gotten under my skin.

That is sort of the situation that Paul encountered in the Corinthian church that led him to write the extraordinary hymn to love that we encounter here in the 13th chapter.

Aren't those words just wonderful? Who *wouldn't* want to love like that and to be loved like that? I read this passage a lot at weddings and I think that is because it is so deeply aspirational. We all want to know that this kind of love is possible, even if it's fleeting, and rare.

But too often, we get Copernican revelations and unfortunate e-mails.

It is hard work to commit to love. It is hard work to commit to love when what we encounter seems closer to self-absorption and unkindness than it does to the divine love of Christ.

This is so often true that Frederick Buechner also echoes the sentiment that love is a choice. He writes, "In the Christian sense, love is not primarily an emotion, but an act of the will. When Jesus tells us to love our neighbors, he is not telling us to love them in the sense of responding to them with a cozy emotional feeling. You can as easily produce a cozy emotional feeling on demand as you can yawn or sneeze. On the contrary, he is telling us to love our neighbors in the sense of being willing to work for their well-being

even if it means sacrificing our own well-being to that end, even if it means sometimes just leaving them alone. Thus in Jesus' terms, we can love our neighbors without necessarily liking them. In fact, liking them may stand in the way of loving them by making us overprotective sentimentalists instead of reasonably honest friends."²

Which is to say that whatever love is, love is primarily a choice.

What is particularly interesting to me is that, in a great hymn to love, Paul takes a moment to identify what love is *not*. He writes,

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.

Now, please note, Paul is not saying that we are not frequently all of these things. We may indeed be envious, boastful, arrogant or rude. We may often insist on our own ways, and be irritable or resentful. Occasionally we may be happy that we got away with wrongdoing. Paul does not claim that these things do not happen. Indeed, he does not claim that Christians do not *do* these things from time to time.

Indeed, for Paul to claim such would have been laughable to the Corinthian Christians.

They knew perfectly well that their neighbors could be petty, rude, mean and self-absorbed, and that despite being Christians!

No, Paul is very realistic in his assessment of the Corinthian Church.

And he knew that it was not *love* that motivates such actions.

And so it is that as I speak to you today about true love, I want to be very clear in not confusing what love is.

Love is none of the things that Paul says it is not. And the church has been guilty on occasion of propping up such behaviors by encouraging our members to live into

² Frederick Buechner, Wishful Thinking, A Seeker's ABC. (HarperOne, San Francisco, 1993) p65

relationships that tolerate such behaviors to the exclusion of loving one's own self. Let me be very plain: if you are in a relationship that is characterized by abusive behavior, God wants you to have help. God wants the abuse to stop. Sometimes abuse stops because of a change of behavior. Sometimes it stops because of change of relationship. But make no mistake about it: God does not delight in seeing God's creations beaten down. So if you are in a situation of abuse, please talk to me. Please talk to Drew. Please talk to Sarah Kate if talking to a male is uncomfortable. And I say these things because love is an act of will, and loving oneself is an act of will. And you deserve to be loved.

And when we love and are loved, God is served in the world.

I have been honing a marriage homily for roughly 15 years now, some of you probably have heard it – well, actually, I've preached it at some of your weddings. And if you haven't, it goes something like this: Love gives us the chance to show the world what God is like. Marriage is a vocation because God is glorified when people see what love looks like.

Like I said, I've been honing this homily for fifteen years because I believe it reflects a tiny, miniscule, incomplete and inadequate bit of what God is like.

Elsewhere in the New Testament, we read that *God is love*.

It's so interesting. God didn't have to make creation. God is complete in and unto God's own self. God's creation of humankind didn't come about due to some inadequacy of God's being. Rather, theologians say, God made creation out of the overflowing of God's love.

And it is the overflowing of God's love that will address the pain of the world. Just as the psychiatrist earlier diagnosed the pain of the individual as the root cause of self-centeredness, so the brokenness of sin is the root cause of violation of *shalom* that exhibits itself in so much hurt in the world.

It is the overflowing of love that will heal the world. Indeed, it is *only* the overflowing of love that will heal the world.

That overflowing is ongoing, but it is not yet complete.

For many years, I passed by a weathered bronze plaque on the wall of the McKay center at Princeton Seminary. The McKay center was the refectory of the school, so we passed by it every time we had a meal. The plaque was placed by the class of 1953 in memory of their friend James Joseph Reeb, who was killed in the marches of Selma, Alabama.

He responded to a call from Dr. King to come, and to march, and on the night March 9th, fell to the sidewalk after a crushing blow to the skull. His classmates placed the marker in memorial to him. Years later, the seminary invited a member of the class of 1953 to preach in chapel to commemorate the Selma march. His classmate wanted to appeal to those gathered to work for the healing of the world, and he began by listing the ways he might appeal to those listening. He might appeal by long friendship. Or he might appeal to them by citing great social concern. He might appeal to them on the basis of Princeton's tradition of leadership, he said. But then he said, "None of these is adequate. I can appeal to you only on one basis: that we join together in coming to grips with this question: 'What am I, as a Christian, to do?' Not what am I as an individual, or as a

citizen, or even as a member of this seminary community, but “What am I, *as a Christian*, to do?”³

That is the heart of Paul’s hymn to love in 1 Corinthians. Love is an act of the will. And to love is to be joined to God’s ongoing work of reconciling the whole of creation. It is to be invited to bear all things, believe all things, hope all things, endure all things.

Love, as I have said, is a vocation. Love is a holy calling. Love is born out in marriage as well as in friendship, sometimes at the same time. Love is lived in church and in the home. If there is any hope for redemption of the world, it is in that God first loved us, indeed, that the great redemption epic of Christian faith is God’s love letter to the world. A story is told of a little boy whose sister was suffering from a rare blood disorder. It was determined that a transfusion was needed, and knowing that the best hope for recovery would come from a transfusion from her brother, he was asked by the nurse if he could be very brave and give her his blood.

The boy bit his lip and said, “No.”

They pleaded with him, and finally he relented. They placed the needle, and only after he began giving blood did he begin to cry. Worried that he was in pain, they rushed to him.

“Does it hurt,” they asked?

“No,” he managed to get out through his sobs.

“Well, what is it,” they asked him.

Finally he managed to ask the question that troubled him, “How long will it take for me to die?”

It was only then that they realized that he didn’t understand that they only needed a pint of his blood.

³ Richard J. Oman. *No Greater Love* in The Princeton Seminary Bulletin. Series 2, 1995. P224

That is the love of God, love sees the self-centeredness of the world and knows that it is but a symptom of deep hurt. That is the love of God, that gives of itself the point of depletion, to the point of death, even death on a cross.

Love is not a cozy feeling. It is an act of the will. And the question remains, for you and for me, “What am I, *as a Christian*, to do?”

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost, Amen.