

Let's get one thing quite clear: this is not a sweet passage. I don't do syrupy or saccharine very well and thought of preaching a sermon on a saccharine, syrupy selection of scripture is about more than I can tolerate. I would imagine the only thing much worse than preaching it would be listening to it.

Archbishop Desmond Tutu, the retired Archbishop of Cape Town in South Africa and the head of the Truth and Reconciliation commission, has a wonderful book. It is entitled, God Has a Dream, A Vision of Hope for Our Time.

Tutu begins each chapter with the words, *dear child of God*. With these words he sets the tone of what is to follow, affirmation of the worth of human life, of the infinite value that God places on each of us. The titles of two of the central chapters are: *God loves you as you are*, and *God loves your enemies*. Tutu writes:

“Dear child of God, in our world it is often hard to remember that God loves you just as you are. God loves you not because you are good, no, God loves you, period. God loves us not because we are lovable. No, we are lovable precisely because God loves us. It is marvelous when you come to understand that you are accepted for who you are, apart from any achievement.”¹

Likewise he continues in the next chapter:

“Dear child of God, if we are truly to understand that God loves all of us, we must recognize that he loves our enemies, too. God does not share our hatred, no matter what the offence we have endured. We try to claim God for ourselves and our cause, but God's love is too great to be confined to any one side of a conflict or any one religion.

¹ Tutu, Desmond. God Has a Dream: A Vision of Hope for Our Time. Pp31-32

And our prejudices, regardless of whether they are based on religion, race, nationality, gender, sexual orientation, or anything else, are absolutely and utterly ridiculous in God's eyes."²

Which perhaps leaves us with question, what does it mean to love the way God loves?

About the first thing we have to do regarding this scripture we have read this morning is peel away any romantic preconceptions we have attached to it. As previously stated, this is not a sweet scripture. It is not a scripture intended for dewy eyed brides and grooms to swoon over on their wedding day. I am so often asked to read this passage for weddings and reflect on it that I have been honing a wedding homily about this passage for years now, and among the points I regularly make about it is that it is not about romance and wedding day good feelings. No, to fairly and rightly consider this scripture we have to step away from all of the drivel that Hollywood has pedaled about what love is and is not and consider that Paul presents a competing vision about what *God* says about love. To be sure, the Bible does have things to say about romantic love, and there can be application of this text for our romantic lives if we are so inclined, but this isn't a passage about romance.

The ancient city of Corinth enjoyed a reputation somewhat akin to Vegas. Some say Corinth had gone respectable by the time of the establishment of the church, but one of the assumptions that we can make given this context is that the church represented at least something of a countercultural voice in the city. Second, Paul seems to think that as a countercultural voice, this church he has founded leaves a little something to be desired. On occasion, it seems the Christians in Corinth had missed some pretty significant opportunities to demonstrate that God's way is different than the other ways. Third, these

² Ibid, pp43-44

missed opportunities, painfully, were directly in the church. The First Pauline Church of Corinth had experienced some growing pains. It was also a congregation that contained some Christians who experienced some personal growing pains as they sought, albeit not as robustly as Paul would like, to learn how to be Christian. Paul wrote to them out of concern for their well-being as a congregation. He wanted them to know what love looks like.

Personal application of this text, though, may be a bit of a challenge. If you do not love someone, it is rather hard to manufacture feelings. You might be able to grow to love someone- after all, years and years of arranged marriages have demonstrated just that - but again, this is not a passage about romantic love. This is a passage about the love that God calls us to demonstrate- in the church and in ourselves- in order that we might be a valid witness to who God is and what God is about.

Essentially, this passage makes three points – first, that religious practice not rooted in love is largely irrelevant. Second, that love has some distinctive characteristics. Finally, whatever spiritual gifts we may possess, in the end, it is love that abides and endures.

Love is serious. The calling to love is serious. If love is not to be disingenuous, we cannot let it be only about romanticism and sentimentality, there must be some *substance* to our claims to love.

The challenge Paul faced in writing this letter remains today: personal experiences that we have of love get in the way of hearing what Paul had to say. Our very human experiences of loss, frustration and betrayal as well as faithfulness, endurance, support and nurture combine to give us a view of love that is tempered by an incomplete understanding of the self-giving nature of love. It is the subject of late-night dorm

discussions, popular media and even serious discourse whether or not truly self-giving love is possible. At the heart of our experiences, we – I – always remain the center of the experience of love. *I love this person. I want to show this person my devotion. I need to demonstrate the love I feel.* Love, unexamined, can even be perceived as a selfish emotion.

But love described by Paul is not. Love, described by Paul, is the very expression of Christian vocation.

Of course, love in the abstract is very difficult to comprehend and Paul gives the Corinthians a number of adjectives of what love looks like. Patient, kind, not envious, boastful or rude. Actually, like Jesus.

Yes, actually, the revelation we have of Jesus Christ is about love. I cannot think of another word to describe what God has demonstrated to us.

And as imperfect as our witness and our understanding may be, there are those saints who have shown us love. I think of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a martyr for Christianity, executed by the Nazis, who wrote: “God himself has undertaken to teach brotherly love; all that men can add to it is to remember this divine instruction and the admonition to excel in it more and more... When God was merciful to us, we learned to be merciful with our brethren. When we received forgiveness instead of judgment, we, too, were made ready to forgive our brethren. What God did to us, we then owed to others. The more we received, the more we were able to give... This God himself taught us to meet one another as God has met us in Christ.”³ There are indeed saints among us who have taught us love.

³ Bonhoeffer, Dietrich. Life Together. P24

No, this is not a sweet passage of scripture, but it is an important one. Love is important in our Christian vocation. It is the cornerstone. Without love, we gain nothing.

But the hard part is when we encounter that which does not inspire easy love in us. The hard part is where our experience does not point us in the direction of love, but of hatred sometimes, but more often, indifference.

It's not always easy to love. We are too often struggling to do the best that we can with the junk we're hauling along with us to get it right.

But Jesus showed love. He told stories about what love looks like. Do you remember the one about the fellow who was going down the road and he got mugged and left for dead? Two fine people walk by and did nothing, but then somebody came along and picked him up, put him in his own car and took him to the hospital and said he'd pay the bill. Or maybe you remember a rebellious young man who decided he wanted to get out and live so he asked for an early payout on his inheritance. He wandered off where he shouldn't have gone and did things he shouldn't do with people with whom he shouldn't have done them. He blew it all and decided it was time to come home, and his father, seeing his train-wreck of a child, ran across the fields to greet him in great joy.

To know Jesus is to see what love looks like, to see the love that Paul did his best to describe. In our most Christian moments, we remember what God has done for us and it moves us to similar action.

Love is not weak.

Love does not cause us to sit around staring dreamily into each other's eyes in a sort of mutual admiration society. Love is patient, kind, enduring, bearing, believing - but love is not weak.

Indeed, evangelical pastor Rob Bell got the message down to two words which he used to title his book about salvation: *Love Wins*.

What Paul is admonishing the Corinthian Christians to do, to remember and live, is that love is at its very heart, a call to action, a different kind of action, a Christ-like kind of action. It is a different thing to love the way that Jesus loves.

When Jesus was asked what was the most important commandment, he replied with a very succinct old creed of Judaism: love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength, and love your neighbor as yourself.

This is what love looks like: Love is patient, love is kind, 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 wrongdoings, but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

Love can be a slippery concept. It is hard to quantify – Paul didn’t even manage to quantify it. He could only describe it, and his description is incomplete. It’s a good description, but there is more to love than just what Paul recited.

Archbishop Tutu rewrote his book a few years later to be appropriate for children. He wrote, “Each of us carries a piece of God’s heart within is. And when we love one another, the pieces of God’s heart are made whole.

That’s what love does. It makes everything whole. Love makes a new creation.

It reminds me of my favorite hymn, “How Can I Keep from Singing?” I love all the verses, but it is the refrain that I love most. Some versions sing, “Since Christ is Lord of heaven and earth...” but Robert Lowry’s original words sang, “Since Love is Lord of Heaven and earth, how can I keep from singing?”

And so it is. Love is Lord of heaven and earth – how can we keep from singing?

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