

Jan 30, 2022 Epiphany 4C  
1 Cor. 13:1-13  
Love Actually

*"Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It does not dishonor others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. Love never fails."*

I wonder if Paul knew that these words would be the most popular wedding text for centuries to come. And I wonder if he knew that half of those marriages would fail. Among imperfect people, these words just don't ring true.

Let me share something about pastors and weddings. Most pastors have 3 or fewer wedding sermons. That's not true of funerals. Funeral sermons are unique and don't get re-used. But weddings—we just change the names and preach the same sermon or sermons over and over.

I usually start with the same joke. A young girl came home one day, having just heard for the first time the story of Snow White and the seven dwarfs. The little girl went and immediately began telling the story to her mother, who listened intently as the excited little girl spoke. As she got near the end of the story, she asked her mother if she knew how the story ended. The mother said, "Of course, Snow White and the Prince live happily ever after." The little girl quickly corrected her and said, "No they didn't, Mommy. They got married."

Paul writes that love never fails. Why then does it seem as if love fails about half the time?

A quick look at the Greek text of this passage shows that Paul writes using the word *agape*. *Agape* is one of the three Greek words for love used in the New Testament. There is *eros* or "erotic love" and *phileo* or "brotherly love." Finally there is *agape*, a self-giving love, most often shown to be the love God has for us. It is this *agape* that bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. It is this self-giving *agape* love of God that never fails.

Paul calls *agape* love a "more excellent way." To set love in an extreme example, Paul writes that if he understands all mysteries and has faith so as to move mountains, but has not love, he is nothing. If he were to give away everything he owns and hands over even his very life, but has not *agape* love, then he is nothing.

So what is the difference between this godly love that never fails and the kind of love that results in half of all marriages ending in divorce? The difference is that love that starts with us and goes out to another person is usually conditional. "I love you as I think you are." Or "I love you as you are now." Or worse yet, "I love you as I wish you were and hope to change you to be like the ideal of you that I love."

All of these are examples of love that start with "me." Yet, if I change and you change, this feeling of love will likely go away. I wake up and realize that the feeling I had has gone away and may never return. At that point, I can either give up on love and stick with a loveless marriage, or I can give up on you and seek love elsewhere. Neither of these options are suggested by scripture.

In one of my early versions of my wedding sermon, which is now culturally irrelevant, I would say something like this:

*Bride, perhaps when you first met groom and perhaps even today as you look into his eyes, you think that he is as gorgeous as Robert Redford, as funny as Woody Allen, as athletic as Michael Jordan, and as smart as Albert Einstein. That's not love. I don't know what you call it, but it is not love. But one day, you will wake up next to him in bed. You will see the dirty clothes he left on the floor. You will remember the fight you had yesterday. You will realize that he is as gorgeous as Woody Allen, as funny as Michael Jordan, as athletic as Albert Einstein, and not like Robert Redford in any way whatsoever--but you will keep him anyway. That's love.*

*Groom, there will also be for you days when your bride is not as easy to love as she is today. One day you will wake up next to her and her face will not be as radiant as it is today. Her smile will not be as bright and warm as it is today. You will remember the disagreement you had the night before. And you will remember the vows you will make today to love her just as Christ loved His bride, the church, and gave Himself up for her. And your emotional love and physical love and your sentimental love will*

*fail you. If you are to love her that way, you will need more than an emotional love or a sentimental love or a physical love. You will need a Perfect Love.*

Paul tells us of this "more excellent way." We can infuse our lives with *agape*, the love that is God's love for us. *Agape* love starts with God, and God's love for us. With this love of God and God's love for me, I can then begin to see other people as God sees them. From this experience, I reach out in love to others with the love that begins in the very life and nature of God.

The love that is within God's kingdom is not conditional. God's love for your spouse is not dependent on his or her likes and dislikes, job, mood or anything else so changeable. God's love for your children does not depend on their lovability. God's love for your friends does not depend on whether or not they let you down. God's love for everyone else is a lot like God's love for you. This love is a lot more dependable than we are, even on our best days.

At this point a detour is needed to clear up one possible point of confusion. This is not to say that someone who is suffering abuse needs to stay in the abusive situation. God's love for creation is not an excuse for tolerating an abusive relationship. Staying in a home where you never know if tonight will be a good night or one of the nights when your spouse hits you or the kids is not love. In physically and emotionally abusive situations, true love for a spouse will mean you remove yourself from harm. Love your spouse enough not to allow the situation to continue.

Real love can mean not becoming co-dependent and supporting someone in their abuse of their own bodies with drugs, legal or illegal. Real love can mean setting clear boundaries. Love that is more concerned for the other can be lived into in many ways that involve standing up to abuse and not letting it continue.

The love that wants something better than abuse and acts to make changes to end such needless suffering is a part of the love God has for all creation. The love of God existed before creation overflowed into this world of ours and that love continues, even though we are fallen and not deserving of it.

This love that was in the very life of God before creation is the love that never fails. This is the love Jesus had when He was dying on the cross and

looked out at those who were killing him, as they mocked him, and said, "Father, forgive them for they know not what they do."

Forgiving those who killed Him was the most precarious thing an all-powerful God could do. When God became flesh in the person of Jesus and lived among us, it was possible that no one would return that love. The incarnation—God's becoming human—is when God risked everything for love. With real love, there is no force or coercion. There is always the possibility in love that the love will not be returned.

God came and lived among us in Jesus, and when the cost of that love was a brutal death, Jesus still did not give up on that love. Jesus could have come, lived among us, died for that love, and no one could have noticed or cared. This precarious act of loving, even though it may well not be returned, is part of the *agape* love of God.

God's love is being more concerned about the other than about your own self, but it is not about self-loathing or being abused. *Agape* love is more than a feeling. *Agape* love is a decision, an act of will. Decide to see others as God sees them. Act on this decision rather than just whether you feel the emotions of love.

Do you want to experience that sort of godly love for your friends, your family, your spouse? Then the love you have for them cannot start with you and go out to them. The love you have for others must start with God. Ask God to give you this gift. Pray for God to reveal to you the way God sees these other people in your life, especially the difficult people you deal with. Seeing another person as God sees them is not always easy, but when we get it right, this love will never fail. This *agape* love is a gift from God, which is the still more excellent way.