

MORE THAN WORDS FOR A WEDDING

1 Corinthians 13: 1-13

Steve Lindsley

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It happens most every time I meet with an engaged couple as we plan the details of their wedding. At some point, around our third meeting, we focus on the service and what they want it to be like. Lots of details to iron out: how many bridesmaids and groomsmen, whether or not they want a unity candle, whether they'd like someone to read a poem or scripture. And it's here where it usually comes up, and it's described to me in any number of ways: *I'd like someone to read the "Love Chapter"* – or – *Pastor, could you use that thing from the Bible that talks about, you know, love and stuff* – or – *Let's read that thing that everyone uses at weddings.*

I smile and nod my head, knowing exactly what they're talking about. And the fact that they can't refer to it as the thirteenth chapter of Paul's first letter to the church in Corinth isn't that big of a deal. I know what they're talking about. It's the "Love Chapter," after all – lots of wonderful, beautiful, poetic words. They are read at weddings because one would hope the two people making this kind of commitment are doing so out of love for each other.

And Lord knows the words do strike a chord on the big day, don't they? *Love is patient and kind* – the young couple look wistfully at each other, knowing full well these are virtues they'll need to make good use of in their life together. *Love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude* – how about that argument last week, huh? *Love does not insist on its own way* – they chuckle openly, as they understand that individuals agendas must now be merged with a new unified one. *Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things – love never ends.* Aaah!

As long as I have the pleasure of officiating weddings I will never deny a couple the chance to have "the Love Chapter" read at their service. But I'll be honest with you – if I had my druthers, I would encourage folks to look elsewhere for that special wedding reading. And it's not that 1 Corinthians 13 aren't beautiful words – they are. It's not because they don't convey an important truth that all people should put to use in human relationship – they do.

No, it's the fact that we've relegated these thirteen verses to almost pop culture status, like some sweet slogan you find etched in a card in the Hallmark store. We've even given them a name - "Love Chapter" – that conveniently removes them from their original context. We've enshrined the words themselves in brass so any variation of the words as we're used to hearing them doesn't seem "right" – like the wedding when I read a different translation and was accosted by someone afterwards for not reading the assigned verses. How ironic is it that we have actually fallen in love with the words themselves, more so than the message they are trying to convey!

Because I'll tell you this – when the apostle Paul sat down to write these thirteen verses, I can promise you the last thing he had on his mind were weddings. In fact, if you want to know the truth, Paul was angry when he wrote this. Angry and furious and frustrated at a particular gathering of Christians in the Greek seaport town of Corinth. It didn't help that this church was his baby – a fellowship he founded and was still heavily invested in. Like a loving parent he had guided them along the way – infancy and

childhood had gone okay, but now the church was approaching adolescence, and you know how that goes. He saw amazing potential in this faith community in this thriving port town – lots of diversity and resources, a strong economy. But he also watched in agony as those same things became the very source of something you would never expect in a community of faith: conflict.

Yes, I know – conflict. In a church, can you imagine?! It's hard to believe, isn't it, that a group of people united by the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, gathering together to worship and serve God, could ever get entangled in the messy web of conflict. But it happened. Here's just a smattering of what the Corinthian church was dealing with:

- There were people in church leadership caught up in power struggles
- There were people in the church who weren't following proper order and polity
- There were people – actual church members! - engaging in some inappropriate behavior outside of church
- And here's the kicker – there were people there whose hair had grown too long for proper church worship!

You know, I'm not sure whether it disturbs me or makes me feel better that the church 2000 years ago – just decades removed from Jesus walking the earth – the church then encountered the same kinds of conflicts and divisions that plague the church today! Things had gotten pretty bad for the Corinthian church. They were beyond just simply not getting along – they were barely living on the same planet. The divisiveness and discord had become so embedded in their fellowship that it was threatening the very existence of the church.

That's the hard part of being the church, isn't it – an imperfect people worshipping and serving a perfect God? That just clashes, doesn't it? Out of its brokenness, the church is supposed to point people to the One who heals all rifts and brings about wholeness. Out of its brokenness, the church is somehow supposed to do that. And while the church has and will continue to do amazing and wonderful things, it will also stumble along the way. It can't help it. The church lives into its mission and vision in spite of itself.

You know, I can't help but think of a NOVA TV special I saw on PBS a few years back. This particular episode had been billed as one that would focus on two groups whose members worked tirelessly for the good of the community, above and beyond all individual needs. No individual put themselves first. I wondered what groups of extreme selflessness would be chronicled – some previously undiscovered tribe in the African jungle? An isolated clan living in the interior of South America? Some unique cohort in the far, frozen North? No. The NOVA program focused on ants and cockroaches. Ants and cockroaches! In their quest to find individuals that are by nature selfless, NOVA had to look outside our own species.

It was out of this sense of frustration and bewilderment that I imagine Paul sitting down to write his letter. In his mind he recounts all the difficulties this Corinthian church he loved so much was facing – all the pettiness that had festered to toxic levels; all the divisiveness that apparently ants and cockroaches can work through. He's torn between feelings of anger and sorrow, between irritation and pity, trying to think of what

he can say to them; what he can *write* that maybe, just maybe, would lead them to see beyond themselves to Jesus. He tries to be straightforward. He tries to be the loving parent. He even gets all scientific with this new image of the “body of Christ.” And then in the very next chapter, he finally decides to tell it like it is. And he writes these words:

Love never gives up. Love cares more for others than for self.

Love doesn't want what it doesn't have.

*Love doesn't strut, doesn't have a swelled head, doesn't force itself on others, Isn't always "me first," doesn't fly off the handle, doesn't keep score of the sins of others, Doesn't revel when others grovel, takes pleasure in the flowering of truth, Puts up with anything, trusts God always, always looks for the best, never looks back, But keeps going to the end.
Love never dies.*

We don't yet see things clearly. We're squinting in a fog, peering through a mist. But it won't be long before the weather clears and the sun shines bright! We'll see it all then, see it all as clearly and completely as God sees us, knowing him just as he knows us!

But for right now, until that completeness, we have three things to do to lead us toward that consummation: Trust steadily in God, hope unswervingly, love extravagantly. And the best of the three is love.

So go after a life of love as if your life depended on it – because it does.

Not once was Paul thinking about two people exchanging wedding vows when he penned this. Not once did he imagine that thousands of years later his words would be enshrined and fallen in love with as the epitome of romantic expression. No, Paul had something else entirely in mind. *He* was thinking about a dangerous and radical love; a love that comforts the afflicted and afflicts the comforted. A love that is so much more than just simple charity or being nice to someone; but a love that transcends our human frailties in a way that brings us together.

It is a love *made* for the body of Christ, in Paul's time and in our own. A love which reminds those church leaders, like the ones we ordained and installed last week, like the one standing behind this pulpit, that no one has all the answers; for while one day *we will see face to face*, now all we see is *in a mirror dimly*. A love which points us to something more than the letter of the law: the spirit behind it, so that polity and order do not become the source of our devotion, but tools that point us to that source. A love which transforms the individual and the community so their lives are ruled not by the whims and ways of a broken world but by a God who calls us into God's *shalom*. And a love which reminds us that the length of our hair, or the style of our dress, or the color of our skin or any of the other things we use to divide should never stand in the way of people and their God.

This love which Paul writes about here takes practice, takes intentionality, takes dedication. It is more than just a feeling of the heart but an act of the will. It is not about sentimentality and romance; it is about choice – a choice that leads us to action. And

this action is *not* like those of a certain televangelist north of us, whose response to the horrible Haitian earthquake this past week was to condemn an entire nation for their supposed “unfaithfulness.” No, the action Paul calls us to is like the one you and I will have an opportunity to participate in before you leave today, as we take up a special offering to support Presbyterian Disaster Assistance's compassionate relief efforts for our brothers and sisters in Haiti. *That's* the real Christian response. *That's* us choosing to put love into action.

And that's the real beauty of what perhaps could be more accurately called the “Action Chapter,” don't you think – when the love it speaks of so eloquently comes alive in us? A woman attended church one Sunday with a friend. A young family with two children, a boy of 6 and a girl of 4, sat in front of them. The little girl was doing her best to sit still but wasn't succeeding, despite the frequent reminders of her parents. Several worshipers sitting nearby were starting to get annoyed.

That was right around the time that the scripture reader began reading the passage for that Sunday: 1 Corinthians 13. *Love is patient...*, the reader said, as the parents continued to gently gesture to their squirming daughter, *Shhhhh*. The mother picked the girl up off the floor and sat her down in the pew.

Love is kind ... The girl slid off the pew again, took her brother's face in her hands and gave him a kiss. He gave her a hug in return.

Love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude.... The father placed his hand on his daughter's head and, again, asked her to stay still. She finally did, folding her legs and determinedly looking straight ahead.

Love does not rejoice in wrongdoing but rejoices in truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things And now faith, hope, love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love..... The little girl reached for her father's hand, who patted it and then held it in his own. And the lady behind them thought to herself, “That little girl might not have understood one word of that scripture, but she knew, already, what love was about. Because it was shown to her.”¹

You see? They really are more than words for a wedding. And to quote Mary Glen quoting Paul, *Go after a life of love as if you're life depended on it – because it does.* Thanks be to God. AMEN.

1 http://homileticonline.com/subscriber/illustrations_for_installment.asp?installment_id=93040507, visited on 1.12.2010.