

1 Corinthians 13

The saying is that familiarity breeds contempt. I find that to be a danger in a lot of things, there are songs that get overplayed on the radio so badly that, even though you like the song, you just don't want to hear it anymore. I have had clergy colleagues whisper conspiratorially that they are quite frankly tired of Amazing Grace, How Sweet the Sound. Being a kid who grew up in the church in the 1980s if I never hear, Our God Is an Awesome God again it will be just fine with me. 1 Corinthians 13 is on my watch list for things that might be getting over-used, because of weddings primarily. When it comes time to pick the scripture for a wedding service this part of Paul's letter to Corinth is usually at the head of the pack, especially with people who may have only a passing acquaintance with the Bible. Psalm 23 and Ecclesiastes 3 at funerals, also on the watch list.

The thing is though, this doesn't wear out; and that, of its own merit, is noteworthy. But as I started to think about it this week, I know I do have a familiarity problem with this text. I know it maybe a little too well, so what I decided to do was to go back and start at the beginning of 1 Corinthians and just read it all the way through. The first thing I noticed is that, with the exception of a few flashes of brilliance, the first letter to the Corinthians is pretty dull and sometimes pedantic, and even a little confused sometimes. Early on Paul is trying to make a point about how glad he is that he didn't baptize any of them, until he remembers that he did actually baptize a significant number of them and actually doesn't remember if he baptized others, but ends up saying that baptizing wasn't even his job anyway. He sounds almost like Daffy Duck on a rant. Then he pulls out of that downward spiral by saying that the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, and gets back on track for a minute, until he gets bogged down in all this nitty gritty stuff about the things that are going wrong in the church, some of which is important, some of which we could probably do without. It occurred to me that, even though we tend to read this as some sort of theological statement, it bears remembering that this is a pastoral letter and Paul was doing the work that I was talking about last week, challenging, correcting, and even scolding. But then chapter 13 happens, and all of Paul's peculiarities sort of fade away into the background, and something truly inspiring comes to the front.

Chapter 12 ends an important discussion of spiritual gifts with the lead in, "And now I will show you a more excellent way." The more excellent way is, of course, love. It's like Paul gets through all this other "important" stuff and then suddenly takes a breath and realizes that everything that he just said, while it's true and real and needed, is probably just vanity and chasing after the wind. Chapter 13 is an epiphany dropped into the middle of a newsletter article or a set of bylaws, it doesn't really fit, it almost seems like it's written by a different person. And maybe it is, maybe it's written by the Paul that manages to set aside his own ego for a second (he does show flashes of that capability), maybe it's written by a man who puts aside all the worries and grievances that are sure to be present in any relationship and takes a minute to breathe the Spirit of God in deep.

If we do not have love we are nothing. For that to be true our definition of love is going to need expansion, maybe dramatic expansion. That's usually where I take my wedding sermons: love that is lasting between a husband and wife needs to be bigger than what gets gushed out by Hallmark. That insight is good and true enough, but what I realized as I read through Paul's letter was that what he's talking about here is not able to be confined or contained in something as narrow as romantic love, or even friendship. He had covered marriage and community already, he has certain standards and rules that he obviously believes will structure those things adequately. Parts of those rules and regulations,

we might rightfully dispute as modern people, with different ideas about men and women and different perspectives on how a marriage should function. Paul is actually not a fan of that sort of thing, he thought being single and celibate was the bees knees because it allowed him to focus completely on God, but even in his admittedly rare state of conviction, he acknowledges that without love, it amounts to nothing.

This idea of being nothing without love is pretty important, and Paul himself is a perfect example. He is one of those people who is like super driven and disciplined and honestly probably not someone I want to hang out with. One of my friends who is an Episcopalian priest actually has the guts to tell people right off: I don't like Paul! I don't think a lot of people did actually. One of the divisions in the Corinthian church was between people who thought Paul was the Alpha dog and people who thought Apollos was the Alpha dog. Paul and Apollos actually didn't have a beef with one another, but their followers apparently were starting to, mainly over them. Apollos was, by all accounts a really talented evangelist. In my imagination I think he was probably tall and athletic and could really tell a joke at the just the right time. He was the kind of guy that just made people naturally want to be around him. And he was smart, he picked up the Gospel and was able to debate with the best of the secular philosophers. When I picture Apollos, I can't help it, but George Clooney springs into my mind.

Paul was more like Danny Devito, and not like lovable funny Danny Devito, more like Louie from Taxi Danny Devito. Cranky, abrasive and not very good looking at all. Paul was a born zealot, a fanatic really. He approved of the stoning of Stephen, without actually getting his hands dirty, he persecuted the church, trying to root out the impurity of this new way. And the thing is, even after Jesus appeared to him on the road to Damascus and blinded him temporarily, even after Saul became Paul, and took his new faith on a different journey, all of those old iniquities remained a part of him. He knew that what he lacked more than anything though was love. The difference between Saul the persecutor and Paul the Apostle was love. Saul had all the things that Paul had except that. The love that Paul had overcame all the other stuff, and he knew it. He knew that his ability as an orator wasn't the thing, he knew that his education and training in rhetoric wasn't the thing, he certainly seemed aware that it was not his sunny disposition (because he didn't have one). It was the love of Christ that overshadowed him and was always being formed in him.

It was not that Christ took someone who was already good and just polished them a little more. Jesus encountered a man who was driven, angry and full of violence and changed him into a man who was driven, angry and full of love, and that friends and neighbors is a strange combination, but it works because of the power of love to overcome the darkness. Paul understands his former state as a necessary childhood, when he only saw things dimly, but love and the light of Christ have changed that entirely, and he knows and expects that when he grows more into this love that things will be even more clear and more lovely.

What I think Paul is always trying to tell the world, sometimes more winsomely than others, is that without love (specifically the love that God shows us in Christ) we are nothing but walking shadows, poor players as Shakespeare says that strut and fret their hour upon the stage. Paul understands that he was once one such dim reflection of a person. Having been transformed by love from nothing into something though, he does not forget what he once was, and so is able to be a true apostle, one who bridges the gap from all those who are lost in nothingness to those who would be part of something in faith, hope and the greatest of these: love.