

“What is Love?”

1 Corinthians 13: 1-13

As many of you may know, I was taking a course for my DMin this past weekend. It was titled “Generational Issues in Preaching and Worship.” It was a fascinating class that I won’t go into detail about right now but the general premise was that any time the church gathers for worship, mission or educational opportunities, we need to be aware of the different generations in our midst. We need to recognize that each generation experiences things differently, remembers things differently, and most importantly processes things differently. One of the ways we can see this lived out is by listening to the music of the various generations. Just by listening to the music of a particular generation will tell us everything we need to know about that generation’s experience.

So just for fun, knowing we were looking at 1 Corinthians 13, “the love chapter”, I thought, just for fun, what do the different generations’ love songs talk about? What do they say? I know, my life is so wild and crazy what I do for fun. I fully admit that my idea of fun and your idea of fun may be vastly different, and for some it would be like watching paint dry...but I thought...let’s give it a try and see what comes up?

And y'all, I'm here to tell you if the music we listen to is any indication of what we think is true about love, then is it any wonder our world is as messed up as it is.

For example-you've got the power anthem by Tina Turner... "What's Love Got to do with it? I know you want to sing along...don't you? Okay here is actually a line from the song... "Who needs a heart when a heart can be broken?" Or maybe you are more familiar with the 90's song which asks, "What is Love?" and the very next line says "Baby, don't hurt me, don't hurt me no more". I know you have Night at the Roxbury from Saturday Night Live in your head with Will Ferrell and Chris Katan...bobbing your head to the beat.

Or we have the songs from the 60's, you know the Temptations, the Platters and this little song... "Do you love me?" which basically asks the question "Do you love now that I can dance, meaning I wasn't good enough before but now that I've learn to dance, I'm worthy of your affection.

And don't even get me started on the songs from the 70's and 80's.

After listening to the love songs that shaped a particular generation, I couldn't help but ask myself again...is it any wonder we don't know what love is.

And that's just the music. Don't get me started on the wider culture. We seem to have two complete opposite ends of the spectrum here when it comes to

love. On one end, we are told love is dead and all people want to do is fight and be angry at each other. Then at the other end, we have the Disney Princess' and True Love's Kiss which of course makes everything alright, and we all live happily ever after.

These are the things in our lives, in our world, in our music that tell us about love. Disney Princesses, broken hearts and trying to be someone we are not just to gain someone's affection. These are the ideas that shape what we understand, what we experience about love. So is it any wonder we find ourselves asking, "What is Love?"

Except as people of faith, we really **Should** know what love is. The hope is that we as people of faith should know better than anyone else what love really is. As people of faith, we should know what love is. We are told...

Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant ⁵ or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; ⁶ it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. ⁷ It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. ⁸ Love never ends.

As people of faith we should know what love is, not because of anything we have done. We should know and we do know what love is because of who God is. We know what love is because of what God has done in our lives. As people of faith,

we know, we know what love is because of what God has done for us as God's own Beloved children when God first named us and claimed us. As people of faith we know what love is because who we are and whose we are.

So why aren't we out there, telling the whole world, showing the whole world, what love really is. Maybe it is because unfortunately we as the Church have forgotten this lesson. We have forgotten what love is because we are too busy being right so much so that we have left a trail of broken bodies, broken hearts and broken lives in our midst. Or maybe the real reason we as people of faith aren't out there in the world telling everyone about God's love, showing them God's love is because we don't really like what we are called to be and do when it comes to love and the Kingdom of God. After all, that means practicing what we preach. And don't you know how hard that is?

Isn't it just easier to sit in our pews, to stay behind our church walls and pretend that everything is sunshine and roses, proclaim that we are always right? Isn't it just easier to pretend that we've got this whole faith thing figured out rather than admitting we are just a bunch of people trying to do the best we can when it comes to our faith, rather than admitting we are not perfect? Who wants to proclaim to the world that we are just a bunch of people who don't always get along with each other, and who don't have all the answers? Isn't it just easier to

pretend we are always right rather than admitting we are just a bunch of people relying on God's grace, who have doubts, rather than admitting we are just a bunch of people who need to be constantly reminded that God loves us no matter what? Who would want to be a part of that when it comes to a community of faith?

Well, I'm here to tell you, lots of people would. Lots of people would rather be a part of a community of faith that recognizes it isn't perfect but tries to strive to act out God's welcoming and gracious love in all that it does and says than be a part of a community of faith that pretends everything is sunshine and roses and insists of being right.

Let me explain: This chapter from 1 Corinthians as I have said is known as the love chapter. It is often read at weddings for its beautiful verses and its poetic images. It really is the love chapter for us as people of faith. It tells us everything we need to know about what love is. Okay the whole Bible does that as well but here we have it in one chapter, 13 verses, all in one place. We don't have to flip through page after page to know what love really is. All we have to do is look at these 13 verses.

You know, the funny thing about these 13 verses is that I've heard more than one minister say "If people knew the background and the context" of this love chapter, then they certainly wouldn't want it as part of their wedding. Because

well, I'm going to break this news to everyone. When Paul was thinking about this text, writing down this particular chapter, he was not thinking about two people starting out on a journey of wedded bliss together. That couldn't have been farther from his mind when he wrote this.

When Paul sat down to write this particular letter, what Paul was thinking about was a congregation and not just any congregation. Paul was thinking about a congregation in conflict. Paul was thinking about a congregation that was fighting with each other, a congregation that wouldn't talk with each other. All the while Paul is talking about love, he is thinking about a congregation in so much conflict that when they went to the grocery store to pick up milk and they saw someone from church, they wouldn't even acknowledge each other. When Paul sits down to write this love chapter, he was not thinking about a wedding or marriage. He was thinking about the Body of Christ and how often it gets destroyed, how often it gets beaten and broken simply because we as people of faith insist on being right and forget what love truly is. I know shocking, right?! Who would have imagined conflict in the church?

Now that I have shattered everyone's world by admitting there is conflict in church, let me give us all a little hope. When I hear ministers talking about this text not being perfect for a wedding, I tend to disagree. I think in reality this text is the

perfect text for a wedding. I think in reality this text is the perfect text for any relationship where one or two or three or more people are involved. I think it is the perfect text to teach us just exactly what love is because at the heart of the matter...this text is not about love. It is about conflict.

Let's face it, sometimes when two or three people are gathered, when people are in relationship with one another, there is going to be conflict which also means it is always a good time to be reminded of what love truly is.

Love is not sunshine and rainbows. It is not pretending that everything is okay when our world is falling apart. And Love is certainly not about being right. As people of faith, we know what love really is. Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant ⁵ or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; ⁶ it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. ⁷ It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. ⁸ Love never ends.

These aren't just words on a page for us. This is what we have experienced time and time again in our lives. We know these words are true, we know these words about what love is are real because this is the type of love God has shown to us, given to us time and time again. And it has made all the difference for us.

Paul doesn't write this chapter as poetry. He doesn't write it as filler for his letter. He writes this "love chapter" as practical advice for people of faith who have forgotten what it means to be the Body of Christ for all of God's people. He writes this "love chapter" as practical advice because this group in Corinth and yes, we as modern day disciples need to be constantly reminded why we do what we do.

We don't gather for worship for our own gain. We don't do mission work to make ourselves feel better or to help us realize that we are better off than half of the world's population. We aren't people of faith because we have done anything special to earn that title.

No, we gather for worship, we do mission work, we are people of faith because of who God is and what God has done in our lives.

Paul reminds the group in the Corinth and reminds us today that at the center of what we do and who we are as a Christ community is the understanding that we are in relationship with God and with one another which means...there are going to be differences, which means there is going to be conflict, which means it is time we realize that we are not all the same. We process things differently. We understand things differently. We approach situations differently. Yet still..still we are called to be in relationship with God and with one another. Somehow, we are called to find a way...and that way is loving one another as God has loved us.

We are called to be a community in Christ, a community that acknowledges our differences, that respects all of God's children. We are called to be a community in Christ that celebrates our differences while holding to God's grace and God's love, things that unite us, not divide us. We gather for worship, we share the welcome of God, we proclaim the life giving power of the Kingdom of God because God first loved us and it made all the difference.

We come together as an imperfect, authentic community filled with people who don't always get along because God first claimed us and named us as God's own Beloved children. And it made all the difference in our lives.

As people of faith, we are called to be a community of Christ that knows the reality of division yet keeps in view the cross, the cross which binds us together because of who God is and what God has done in our lives.

It is only when we stop insisting that we are right and remember what love really is that we can know and experience what it means to be a community of faith in the first place. It is only when we realize that in our pursuit of love, not true love, not romance, but our pursuit of love for one another as people created in the image of God, that we can become the light of Christ for those in the darkness, for those who need to hear and know God's love, including us.

As people of faith who know, know deep down in our hearts that it is only through God and God's knowledge of us as individuals and as a community of faith that we are even here in the first place. It is this knowledge, this understanding, this life giving realization that makes all of our relationships, relationships that include the good, the bad, and the ugly, transformative. It is only through God and God's knowledge of us that makes our relationships able bring healing and wholeness to come for all of God's creation.

So the next time someone asks you, "What is Love?", I invite you to tell them just exactly what love really is. Tell them that love has nothing to do with Disney Princess or broken hearts. Tell them that our understanding of what love is beings by knowing the greatest love song of all time, a song that transcends generations. You know how it goes...It starts out like this: "Jesus loves me this I know, for the bible tells me so, little ones to him belong. They are weak but he is strong. Yes, Jesus loves me. Yes, Jesus loves. Yes, Jesus loves for the Bible tells me so."

Amen.