

Homily—Fourth Sunday after Epiphany
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What is Love? (God, You Won't Hurt Me)

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What is love? Other than the title of an iconic 1993 Eurodance song, of course. This question is one of the most enduring in the human experience. Countless discussions, journal entries, works of art, arguments, speeches, sermons, books, and every other form of human expression have been dedicated to wrestling with this question. Today, in Paul's first letter to the Christians of Corinth, the apostle tries to explain to the growing congregation what love looks like for those who live in Christ. It is a powerful description that calls us to reflect on how we live with ourselves, with one another, and with God.

If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. If I give away all my possessions, and if I hand over my body so that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing. 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 wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never ends. But as for prophecies, they will come to an end; as for tongues, they will cease; as for knowledge, it will come to an end. For we know only in part, and we prophesy only in part; but when the complete comes, the partial will come to an end. When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child; when I became an adult, I put an end to childish ways. For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known. And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love.

- 1 Corinthians 13.1-13

Most frequently, we hear this passage read at weddings. After all, weddings are about love between two people and Paul's lengthy description describes love so beautifully. While this is not inappropriate, it is not what Paul had in mind. Paul is describing what love between Christians of all relationships will be like and, as far as we can reckon it through human senses, what it is like to live in God's love. The Christians of Corinth have written to Paul with a grocery list of concerns about their community and they want his help in restoring healthy relationships and patterns. Since Paul's departure from them, tensions have grown, practices have changed, and there is conflict in the community. Paul responds with a long letter, including this passage describing love for those who live in Christ. Love is the greatest of virtues and the core of

everything that a Christian does, says, and is.

Or, rather, love should be at the core of everything we do, say and are. Often we do and say and be in ways that fall short of the standard of love. We enter into relationships of love—different kinds of love—with many people where we make ourselves vulnerable, trusting that the other person will treasure our love and care for it. In the same way, many people trust us with their love, with their hearts, and believe that we will care for them in the same way. Of course, there are different ways to love. The way that I love my brother is different from the way that I love my best friend, which is different from the way I love my cat, which is still different from the way I love my husband. But in each case, these loving relationships, when at their best, reflect the perfect love of God for us which Paul refers to in today's epistle reading.

Regardless of the kind of love or sort of connection we have, in every relationship based on some variety of love, we offer and receive trust and vulnerability. Receiving the love and vulnerability of another person is a sacred honour. I was once told that falling in love with someone is like handing them a loaded rifle, pointed at your heart. The more we love someone else, the more vulnerable we are to being hurt by them, and the greater our trust in them must be. In the same way, when others love us, the greater their vulnerability is. When we care for one another in the way that Christ cares for us, our relationships are deepened, strengthened, and made more holy. When we respond to each other in moments of anger or selfishness or the myriad of other possibilities that fall short of love, we wound one another.

We fall short of the perfection of God's loving example and we carry the scars and wounds of these moments with us into our work, or prayer, and our other relationships. The scars of broken trust and love abused can spread like a virus. If we do not tend to our own hurts and the fractures in our relationships, they can spread like a chip in a windscreen becoming a shattered pattern. Our wounds and scars ache and pain us and, if they do not heal well, we create ways to defend them. We hope to spare ourselves further hurts and pains.

But these defences are half-measures. Better than nothing, but they are not healing of the wounds. They may halt a worsening of the pain, but they do not assist it in improving and, tragically, they may damage other relationships and other people in protecting us. A history of bullying as a child may lead an entirely competent and accomplished adult to snap and rage at even the most well-intentioned and helpful constructive criticism because that wounded seven-year-old still lives in their heart and needs defending. While God's love of us is always beautiful and perfect, like Paul's reminders to the Corinthians, we struggle to live in love. God's love of us wants to tend to our hearts. God's love of us wants to heal us. God's love of us wants to transform us.

And God's love of us is terrifying.

God offers us the opportunity to heal in love. In fact, God calls us to heal in love. To join our lives to that of Christ in baptism is to commit to healing. The healing of ourselves, our relationships, and all of creation. This is God's ultimate plan for all things and it is the plan to which we commit when we become Christians. So why, then, is the prospect of healing love so terrifying? It

terrifies us because it calls us to name and engage with those parts of us that are wounded and hurt. We are so adept at creating defences that we often do not realize consciously the hurt that we are protecting. God's loving desire to heal us demands that we examine our hurts and work to heal them. This is hard work that we are often loath to take up.

A friend of mine, some years ago, was hiking while on vacation and fell on a trail that followed the edge of a ravine. The fall would have been unpleasant anywhere, but they lost their footing, hit the ground, and fell into the ravine. They had many bumps and bruises and a shoulder that required some surgery to be set right, but it could have been much worse. Following the surgery they were prescribed physiotherapy to restore the range of motion and full function of the shoulder. After a couple of weeks, my friend decided that the physiotherapy was inconvenient, a lot of work, and much too uncomfortable. They stopped doing the exercises and stopped going to the appointments. To this day, their shoulder doesn't lift more than a few degrees from resting. They protected themselves from the pain of healing but now live with a permanently disabled joint.

God's love always seeks to make us whole, to restore us to the lives that God intended for us, and to draw us every closer to the perfect love that God shares with us in Christ. This is essential, as Paul reminds us, for without love, all else is nothing. But the journey from where we are today, with all of the scars and hurts that we have given to one another, to the perfect bliss of God's love is not an easy one. Like divine physiotherapy for our hearts and spirits, drawing us closer to God and allowing us to love one another and the whole of creation more perfectly.

But it will always be easier to remain as we are right this moment. It will nearly always be more comfortable to remain with the status quo; to live in the comfortable discomfort of our hurts and scars and the defences we have built around them. Even at the cost of distance from God, distance from one another, and distance from ourselves. Naming our hurts and committing to the journey that will heal and transform them is an enormous amount of work and threatening because it will change our lives. So many people are able to name their hurts and scars but refuse to begin the work and seek the medicine that will heal them, so terrifying is the prospect of engaging with what made the hurt to begin with. This is the work to which Paul is calling the Christians of Corinth: to remember the centrality of love to their lives and to cease their fighting over petty issues and imagined slights, to address the real issues in their community, and return to love as the central pillar of their relationships.

Paul might very well be writing to any Christian community today. There is no parish or congregation in this world that cannot use a reminder to approach themselves and their relationships with one another holding love as the central value. This is not a call to spend a few minutes thinking about how nice love is and how much more pleasant it would be if people loved a little more. This passage from Paul's letter is a call take up the conscious, intentional work of centring love in our lives and taking on the hard work of healing that it demands from us.

God's works of redeeming love call us to convert our lives to examples of healing. Not perfect, unbroken vessels, to be pottery once shattered, now restored with veins of gold holding the pieces together. To grow from the best responses we made as children into the better responses we can

make as adults. To deepen our trust and love in God as our understanding of God has deepened. God's love calls us to trust our maker completely, to make ourselves entirely vulnerable before the source of all being that our pain might be healed, not masked or dulled.

God's love to the loveless shown that they might lovely be. Thanks be to God.