

Year C – Epiphany 4 – January 31, 2010
“Learning to Love” – 1 Corinthians 13
The Lord be with you.

Couples often choose to have 1 Corinthians 13 read at their wedding. It is one of the most beautiful and poetic passages in the Bible. People think of it as a celebration of the love of marriage. However, that’s not really the purpose of the passage. It was actually written as a challenge to Christians to love those who are different from themselves. It was written to Christians who had loads of spiritual gifts but who were missing the most important ingredient in their lives: the gift of love.

There are actually three essential ingredients in the Christian life: faith, hope, and love. It seems that from Corinth to today love is often the missing ingredient in the Church. We can have all kinds of Bible knowledge and right beliefs and still be 100 percent wrong if we don’t have love. We can carry out all kinds of mission and good works and still be 100 percent worthless if we don’t have love. We can have all kinds of spiritual gifts and abilities and still be 100 percent useless if we don’t have love. We can live a life of purity and holiness and still be 100 percent godless if we don’t have love.

Love is the essential ingredient of the Church. But love is not simple. We have been struggling as a Church for 2000 years to live out that essential ingredient as Jesus lived it out. Jesus had a way of loving sinners that drew them in and transformed them. The Church has often had a way of loving sinners that has repelled them and closed their hearts.

The world talks about love, but it is usually a cheap substitute for love. As Christians we can’t take our pattern of love from the world. We look to Jesus as the source and model of love. And the powerful transforming love of Jesus is complex. Real love is not simply tolerance or acceptance or permissiveness. Real love is not mere affection and warmth and making people feel good. Real love is not just attraction and a desire for an emotional high. In fact, real love is not a feeling at all. It is a commitment to honor another person and to serve them as a person of great worth.

Real love is patient and kind. In other words, real love has high hopes for others but never gives up on them. Patience is not saying, “Oh, well, what can you expect? You will always be a loser.” Patience says, “I’m going to keep on hoping, praying, and encouraging you to become all that God intends for you to be.” Patience is not passive. Patience is gentle persistence trusting that God’s will is our future.

An old man was whittling. He happened to be carving the figure of a dog one day when someone asked him how he did it. He thought a moment and said, “Well, I just shave off everything that doesn’t look like dog.”

That is kind of how 1 Corinthians goes about describing love. It gives us a list of negative statements about what love is not. “Love does not envy, does not boast, is not proud, does not dishonor, is not self-seeking, is not easily angered, keeps no record of wrong.” I like how Fred

Buechner described envy. He wrote: "Envy is the consuming desire for everyone to be as unsuccessful as you are."

It seems to me that 1 Corinthians 13 is saying that love is all about growing up. The New Testament tells us to believe like children, but to behave like adults. But when we look around at the world and when we look at our own behavior, we realize that a large part of our problem is that we are spiritually still very childish and not very grown up. Our childishness shows up in so many ways: our short-term perspectives, our limited understanding, our foolish pleasures, our emotional instability.

Have you heard the slogan, "He who dies with the most toys wins"? Little boys and little girls play with little toys. Big boys and big girls play with bigger and more expensive toys. But as some wise person pointed out, the slogan should really be "he who dies with the most toys is still dead." Like children we are busy building houses out of sand. Love is building life on a foundation of rock. Life is not about collecting and playing with toys. Life is about growing up and learning to love.

Like children, we see everything with a short-term view. You've seen how children can get so upset about something that won't even matter in two minutes. Big children can be the same way. If we don't get results right now, we think we are ruined. If we don't get our way right now, we think all is lost. But love asks, will this really matter in 100 years? If not, why get all stressed about it. All that will really matter in 100 years is how I loved those around me.

Like children, we have a limited understanding about everything and yet we think we have to be right about everything. Have you ever tried to reason with a two-year old? Talk about an exercise in futility. They are always right even when they haven't a clue what they are talking about. Big children can be the same way. We can be so sure that we are right that we can't even hear what another opinion is trying to say to us. But love can listen and even understand both sides in an argument. Love recognizes that listening is more important and often more powerful than speaking.

Like children, we are controlled by our feelings. Children often get carried away by their emotions until they even forget what set those emotions off in the first place. Big children can be the same way. We think that how we feel is the most important thing. We make our decisions based on what will make us happy. We get upset when we don't get our way. But love recognizes that life is not about us and our feelings. Life is about learning to love.

Like children, we are basically self-centered. Children big and little look at the world and say Mine! Mine! Mine! Love looks at the world and says, "God's! God's! God's!" Love lives life with gratitude and joy because it is all gift.

Someone once said, "You're only young once, but you can be immature for a lifetime. But 1 Corinthians 13 does promise that we will grow up. Now we talk like children, think like children, and reason like children. But one day we will put childish ways behind us and love like grownups. Now we see through a glass darkly, but one day we will see face to face. Now we know partially, but one day we will know fully even as God fully knows us now.

Love never ends. Really? Well, then why do almost half of all marriages today end in divorce? Because the vast majority of marriages never get beyond feelings of attraction and affection to real love that is not self-seeking, that is not easily angered, and that keeps no record of wrongs. Even many marriages that stay together are just based on attraction and affection and not real commitment. 1 Corinthians 13 is a great passage to read at wedding to challenge couples to move from attraction and affection into real love.

Love does not wear out or run out. The problem is just that so few people have really grown up and learned to love. Love never ends. Love is eternal. In fact, love is the only thing of this life that will last beyond death. Faith and hope will no longer be needed in the resurrection. Toys will be forgotten. Spiritual gifts will be useless. But love, love will last forever. And the effects of the love that we learn to give in this life, will go on shaping our lives forever. Thanks be to God.

Let us pray. Lord of love, open our hearts to Your great love so that we may grow up into real love for You, for one another, and for Your world. In Jesus' name. Amen.