

“Love is Real”

Genesis 2:18-25

1 Corinthians 13:1-13

One of my professors from seminary once told me this story from her own life. She had been on this long trip and was coming back home by plane. And...you know how it is on travelling days. You're running around, trying to keep an eye on your luggage and all your pieces, listening for your gate call, accidentally falling asleep in that wrong position sitting up in your airline seat. By the time you get off the plane, you're usually draggy, exhausted, super out of it. Well, as it happened, it was the very moment that her boyfriend met her at the airport that he decided to drop down on one knee and tell her that he wanted to marry her. My professor told me that, for all the many thoughts and feelings swirling around her head in that particular moment, one of the recurring thoughts was, “No, no, no, no! You can't propose now! I look terrible – I feel terrible.” She knew that she wasn't at her best in that moment and yet.... And yet this man that she loved loved her back and wanted to be her husband.

She told me this story because she said that it was one of the moments of her life where she understood God's grace most profoundly. In her mind, she was stuck on her own shortfalls and imperfections – all the things she wished were different. Yet, the one who loved her loved all of her in spite of the flaws of the moment. She realized that God knows us perfectly – our sins and our successes. There is no make-up kit to conceal our imperfections from God. But just like her then boyfriend and now happy husband – God embraces us wholly. In grace, God sees our beauty, the light of our souls that shines always. In grace, God loves us and teaches us to love.

Now, usually when we look at this passage from 1 Corinthians 13, we're at a wedding, right? We celebrate the joy of romantic love and the way that it can change our lives for the better. We jump to weddings so quickly that we can forget that nothing in 1 Corinthians 13

specifies that it's referring to romantic love. Instead, it focuses on holy love – the love with which God loves us and which we share as a community in Christ. So, when we explore this chapter, we should think about all of our relationships of love – romantic partners, parents, children, friends, even strangers.

One theme repeated throughout this chapter is that almost everything fades over time: prophetic powers, knowledge, generosity, even a powerful faith. They all pale in comparison to the holy gift of love. Today, as we take a moment for domestic violence awareness, we are committed to claiming what real love is and what it is not. So often, abuse within families and relationships is called love when it is anything but. For those trapped in these relationships or who have escaped them, it can be difficult to re-learn what love really is or, well, if real love even exists outside of fairy tales and romantic comedies.

So, today, we celebrate the joys of real love – love that we learned from God and love that we show to be near to God and to one another. Love is patient – it perseveres, it does not take revenge through anger. Love is patient AND love says no to violence to self or others.

Love is kind. It is gentle, it seeks the good of all – it wants to help out so that everyone's real needs can be met. Love isn't, "envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful." Love doesn't boil over with contempt or seethe in resentment. Love doesn't hog all the attention or brag unduly. It isn't proud with a swell head that dismisses the other. It doesn't throw honor out the window because you know you can get away with it. Love doesn't take cheap shots and it doesn't keep score.

Love looks to the person that you're with and says: you are a child of God and you are beautiful. If you are happy, I am happier and when I am happier you are happier. Love isn't a duty or a chore – there's no guilt required. Love is a delight to see joy growing. About two

weeks ago, Lily Bright had a birthday and she made a list of what presents she would like to celebrate. Now, if there's ever a day when you have a right to make everything about yourself and your own happiness, it's your birthday, right? Especially when you're a kid. But Lily had such kindness in her heart that she asked for a blue egg on her list of presents. And when she opened that gift, she told her parents, "actually, this is for Christian. I wanted to be generous." Isn't that remarkable? One of the gifts that she wanted was to be able to make her brother feel loved and celebrated and happy. Love doesn't keep score because love isn't a competition – when we share love, we remember that we're on the same team.

Love is the grand, once in a lifetime moments like wedding proposals, but it's also everyday acts of kindness and sharing. Love is putting extra money in a tip jar when we see baristas struggling. It's picking up a piece of garbage so that people we don't know can enjoy the park more. It's supporting small businesses as much as we can to help us keep going together. It's reaching out, being steadfast, and committing to love that honors all people.

We are called to celebrate and share love as well as we are able. Because one thing that happens to people when their relationships carry the burdens of violence is that they have a hard time discerning whether love is even real. The more that people question whether or not they are worthy of love, the bigger problem becomes. Our faith teaches us that God is love – not just that God made love or asks us to be loving. God is love. If people do not know love then that means that they are losing touch with God. This is one place where our calling comes into it – where living in love changes the world.

Even at the beginning of creation, we find that we were made for love. God said that it wasn't good for the man to be alone. He needed a helper, a partner. He needed someone who was like him, but not the same as him, to come alongside and to help open up the possibilities of this

brand new creation. See, Eve wasn't a part of Adam's personality that was torn out when she was created. When God made the man sleep, both Adam and Eve were newly created. The two of them together were more than the sum of Adam's parts – they were the first community of love. Together, they could do amazing things, new things. They could be separate and live their own lives and find joy when they found each other again. When we find love – any kind of real love – we find ourselves supported and supporting, loved and loving, hopeful and hoping.

In 1 Corinthians, Paul reminds us that love never ends. Another way to say this would be, “love doesn't fall flat.” Real love is stronger than momentary frustrations, disappointments, and fits of temper. Real love believes in the other, can give the other space to find calm, and can come back together to heal and restore. Our relationships are, indeed, imperfect, but if we cannot stand for each other's safety and happiness, then we have lost sight of real love. In those moments, we look to God in Christ, we reach out for the Holy Spirit, and we repent as we seek to re-learn love.

As we celebrate the God of love, let us celebrate the gift of love with all of our hearts and souls and minds. Let us be known by our love and when we meet someone who has lost sight of love from God or from others – let us show them the best of what we have learned from our loving gracious, God. Amen.