

“Paul, Love, and Michelangelo”

1 Corinthians 13: 1-13

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When I hear today’s sermon text, I immediately think of weddings. Perhaps you do, too. The 13th chapter of 1 Corinthians is one of the most commonly used scripture passages in weddings, because its words express our highest ideals of what love should be like: “Love is patient, love is kind, love is not envious...(love) does not insist on its own way...(love) believes all things, hopes all things...love never ends.” This is a couple’s view of love as they enter marriage, before they encounter life’s everyday realities of who sets the thermostat, and who holds the TV remote control!

Of course, Paul was not writing modern-day wedding liturgy. Paul was writing a letter to the church he had helped found in Corinth in the 1st century after Jesus’ death. The church at Corinth had become divided, with different factions claiming allegiance to different leaders, and taking different positions on various issues, including sexual ethics, marriage, false gods, appropriate behavior during worship, and even hairstyles! It sounds a little like churches today. In some ways, life in the church hasn’t really changed that much in the last 2000 years!

That’s why Paul’s letter to the church in Corinth still has relevance for us today. The main purpose of his letter was to persuade them to end the divisiveness among them, and to be reconciled to one another—to love one another.

But, how could Paul know so much about love? After all, Paul is well-known amongst us moderns for some of his statements about women and marriage. Paul wrote earlier in this same letter: “To the unmarried...I say that it is well for them to remain unmarried as I am.” Given this, how could Paul write so eloquently about love that his words are frequently read in weddings 2000 years later? It was because Paul had experienced this perfect kind of love, that he describes, from Jesus Christ.

This passage that Paul has written in 1 Corinthians 13 comes immediately he discusses spiritual gifts in that letter. Paul presents love as a gift from God. Love does not start in the human heart. It is a divine gift. As we are told in the 4th chapter of the First Letter of John, “We love because God first loved us.” We have the ability to love others because God first gave us the gift of loving us.

And God in Christ did give Paul the gift of loving him despite how his faith had become distorted earlier in life. Remember that Paul, when he was still called Saul, went into people’s houses, dragged them out, and had them bound and put into prison for following the Christian way within the Jewish synagogue. Now Christ could have decided to just get rid of Paul. That’s probably what many of us would want to do with an enemy like Paul. But no, Christ had bigger dreams for Paul. He hoped to turn Paul’s zeal for the

Law into zeal for following and proclaiming Christ's teaching. Jesus said Paul was to bring Jesus' "name before the Gentiles and kings, and before the people of Israel."

And we know that Paul did just that. Paul founded churches along the Mediterranean coast from Judea to Rome. Of the 27 books of the New Testament, 13 claim Paul as their author.

Paul had received the kind of love he wrote about from Christ. Christ had known Paul fully, yet Christ had believed all things, hoped all things, and endured all things out of his love for Paul, even though Paul was the most aggressive persecutor of the early Christians.

So, our passage today describes not only how we should strive to love one another, it describes how God loves each one of us. Listen again to some of the phrases of this 13th chapter of 1 Corinthians, as a description of how God loves you: God's love for you is patient and kind . . . because God loves you, God never feels resentment toward you . . . God's love for you bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, and endures all things . . . God's love for you never ends. You have been fully known by God, and yet loved fully by God as well.

What a gift to be fully known by God, and still fully loved by God. Even in our closest human relationships – in marriage, parent and child, or BFF's – none of us can truly fully know another person.

This truth was captured in a movie from the 80's entitled "Peggy Sue Got Married." Peggy Sue, played by Kathleen Turner, was a middle-aged woman transported back through time to her high school years. In this return to her teenage years, she lived again among her classmates as a teenager, but with the life experience and perspective of a middle-aged woman.

She saw sides of her classmates she had not noticed or recognized when she actually was a teenager, and she valued qualities about them she had not before. For instance, instead of shunning the nerdy boy who always got straight A's, in this second pass through her teenage years she befriends him, and helps him invent panty hose, which later makes him rich and famous. Peggy Sue discovers that the brooding, rebellious boy who pushes everyone away emotionally is actually a sensitive and gifted writer. She even learns that her husband had dreams of being a singer, and the talent to do it, but he had to set his hopes aside to take over his father's business, which was really of no interest to him.

Peggy Sue discovered that no person can know another person fully—even within couples who deeply love one another, and have built their life together. There are always more dimensions to a person than we can know. People have gifts and talents, struggles and disappointments, insecurities, fears, and dreams, that we don't recognize or understand.

But God does. God knows us fully. God knows our innermost beings. As we heard in our opening scripture from Psalm 139, God knows the thoughts that occupy our minds, and the words we speak before our lips even form them. God is acquainted with all our ways. God has lived through our struggles with us, and knows and understands the sources of our woundedness. God sees our unique giftedness, and shares with us in having dreams for our lives.

God sees us with the profound insight and vision that far surpasses even the greatest artists of human history. When I was in college, I was lucky enough to take a trip to Italy and while there I saw Michelangelo's sculpture of the biblical hero David. Now, we might have high expectations for any artistic portrayal of David. David was the young man who killed the giant Goliath with his sling and a single stone. David was the man God chose to anoint as king over Israel, the man with whom God made an everlasting covenant, and from whose line Jesus was born.

Creating a sculpture that could live up to these descriptions of David seems virtually impossible. But, 44 years after visiting the city of Florence, I still remember vividly how struck I was by the beauty of this sculpture. It was truly awe-inspiring. No professional photograph can capture its overwhelming beauty.

Michelangelo saw his act of sculpting as liberating from the slab of marble the figure which was imprisoned within it. There is a story that Michelangelo was asked how he possibly could have created such a perfect and magnificent sculpture as that of David. Amazingly, he replied that it was not difficult, that he looked at the piece of marble and saw David, and then he just took away everything that was not David.

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Friends, that is how God sees us. God looks at the mass that is our lives, and sees the beautiful persons God created us to be—separate from all that imprisons us. God sees that perfected being even when only perhaps a hint of its outline is discernable, even when we cannot see our own beauty and gifts clearly.

I don't believe, to borrow an old expression, that God "loves us with all our warts." I believe God loves us despite our warts, and that day by day, God, the master sculptor, gradually chips away at those warts—to liberate our true selves, who, like David, are God's beloved servants with whom he makes an everlasting covenant.

Sometimes in this world we see an example that gives us a glimpse of how God sees us as we are, sees the person we can grow to be, and loves us as he molds and shapes us to become that person. Here is such an example.

In the late 1800's, a newspaper editor in Alabama had a happy, healthy 1½ year old baby girl. She was walking, and had begun to talk. Her name was Helen—Helen Keller.

At 19 months, Helen came down with a fever so high that it almost took her life. It may have been the result of the pandemic of that day, scarlet fever. As you know, she lived but she lost her sight and her ability to hear. As a young child, Helen became so frustrated that she constantly flew into rages, throwing herself, and any objects she could grab, around the room—biting the hands that tried to restrain her so that she wouldn't hurt herself, and kicking anybody, or anything, within reach. Incredibly, given her handicaps, Helen even managed to lock her mother in the pantry one day.

Helen's mother, despite being kicked, bitten, screamed at, and even locked in the pantry, believed in her daughter, and had higher hopes for her daughter than others thought sensible. You know how the story ends: Helen's mother hired a tutor for Helen, named Anne Sullivan, and Anne Sullivan accompanied Helen for the next 50 years, at first enduring Helen's kicking and hitting and screaming and throwing and biting, but ultimately seeing Helen graduate with honors from Radcliffe, and taking pride in Helen becoming a celebrated author, public speaker, and social activist.

Helen's mother and Anne Sullivan had believed all things, hoped all things, and endured all things with Helen. They knew Helen fully, and their love for Helen had no end. They've given us an inspiring example of the kind of love God wants us to show one another. And, if we see such love as was shown to Helen Keller among human beings, imagine how incredible and perfect God's love for each one of us must be.

God has given us the gift of loving us, and has demonstrated to us through Jesus Christ how to love, so that we might love others. To love one another with the ideal love described 1 Corinthians 13, we must allow ourselves to know and believe how fully God loves us. God knows our faults more fully than even we know them ourselves. And yet God still loves each and every one of us, eternally. God endures our sinfulness because God believes in us, and has higher hopes and bigger dreams than we would ever hold for ourselves.

The next time you hear 1 Corinthians 13, maybe at a wedding, revel in the truth conveyed by Paul's words: God's love for you is patient and kind; God's love for you bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, and endures all things. You are fully known by God, and God's love for you never ends.

Thanks be to God. Amen.