

## You don't know Love

Colossians 3:12-17

1 Corinthians 13:1-13

(Play clip, "What's love got to do with it?" Tina Turner)

I know I am dating myself by playing that clip. Still, I couldn't help it. Tina Turner has some voice! And I saw you bobbing and singing along!

I think this makes a pretty good place to start today...focusing on the word "love".

Our readings today both come from the letters of Paul, one to the church at Corinth and one to the young congregation at Colossae. Both of these congregations were struggling; the church at Colossae had started down a road to heresy that was a blending of Judaism, Hellenistic thought and a focus on "rites", "wisdom," and "knowledge". It was a common enough road...if you do all the right things, think the right things and someone teaches you the right things, all will be well. The problem, of course, was that it was sterile, sanitized and assumed that salvation was a matter entirely of the believer's thoughts and actions.

The church at Corinth, on the other hand, was set in a world of riches, extravagance, decadence and depravity. Here the people lived with a motto of "everything goes"! Along with a drive to acquire, there was a drive to dominate. It's not surprising that, even in the church, there was internal squabbling about who was most important, which gifts were more important (which of course would lead back to "who" was most important).

It was in these two different, but uniquely related letters that Paul addressed the problems of the young church and the messed up group of one-uppers and self-aggrandizers who were struggling to understand what it meant to be "Christian"...and, as a whole, not doing too good of a job at it.

It was in that context that Paul wrote what has come to be known as "the love chapter" to the church at Corinth and the exhortation to love found in Colossians.

Before we go much further today, let's confront the oversized Cupid in the room and confess that we don't have a very good understanding of what *love* is; if we ever did it has gotten swallowed up in TV, media and commercialization.

When I was growing up, I heard people use the word “love” to mean a lot of different things. I heard folks talk about “loving coffee” and “just loving” their pet cat. When one girl at school would tell another that she “loved” her outfit, it meant (as far as I could guess) that: a) she liked it and was jealous that it was not hers, b) that she didn’t like it but didn’t want her friend to feel bad or c) that she REALLY didn’t like it, and would be happy to talk about that to anyone who would listen, once the first girl left. So, exactly what DOES “love” mean?

Later on my understanding began to change when I fell in love for the first time. I’m just lucky she is still here in my life. Again my understanding changed when our first (and second and third) daughter was born. Experiences like that tend to be a very practical way of learning what “love” is.

But that begs the question...what IS love? I mean, really? I’m afraid that Tina got it right when she sings that our understanding of love today is “a second hand emotion”.

Are we wise enough to know the difference between falling in love, falling in lust or falling in like? I can’t tell you the number of couples I have counseled who were on the edge of breaking up and, without exception, they would all say the same thing, “He (or she) isn’t the same person I married.” Well, duh. Life does that to you. If your understanding of love is a connection to who a person is NOW, then you will soon find yourself with a stranger.

Do you know what the number one killer of marriages is? It’s not infidelity, or dysfunctions or money or any of those things that are commonly listed. No, it’s unfulfilled expectations. We THINK we know what “love” is and have significant expectations of what it means in our lives. If it falls short, WHEN it falls short, then what? You see, the problem is, you don’t know love.

When Sue and I first married, “love” was all about an island honeymoon, pretty lingerie and time spent together. Little did I understand or suspect that only a few months later, “love” would be watching my wife, home sick with a horrible case of pneumonia (there literally was no space for her in the hospital where we lived), watching her, knowing I could do little...watching her spew a trail of tomato soup from the bed to the bathroom and trying to clean it up before she went back to bed. Put THAT in your Valentine Card, Hallmark!

But somehow, we survived. People do. I know that Michael and Marty are celebrating their 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary today (well done!), a mark not many will make. Sue and I will be lucky enough to reach the same milepost in a few weeks. I know several of you here have been married for a number of years...and some of you have watched as your relationships have crumbled. You ALL know what I mean when I say that the idea of “love” we are sold from the sources all around us is not much more than a second hand emotion. That is not enough to sustain us when times become difficult. It doesn’t offset unfulfilled expectations.

I trust that the people in my life love me; my wife and my daughters. They would probably say that they would love me no matter what stupid thing I might do. And it’s my job not to abuse that trust and the love it represents.

However, somewhere deep inside, in my heart of hearts, I know that there are things I could do that would sever our relationships. Things I could do, things I could say that would go beyond their ability to accept and forgive. I’ve seen it happen far too often where actions or words have destroyed a family. I can’t tell you of the too-many times I have witnessed on-going family feuds play out at funerals or weddings; anger and hatred that has taken years to grow, fester and mature.

It’s rare, you know, for us to truly attempt to understand the depths of what it means that the God of all creation knows us best and loves us most. The One who made us, the One from whom no secrets are hid, the One who cannot be separated from us is the One who loves us, inside and outside, with deep, abiding, merciful love.

Think of that for a moment. I don’t know all the secrets of your lives and in all honesty, I don’t want to know them. However the One who does, the One who is more intimate than a lover not only knows your every secret, but continues to love you.

When we look at ourselves in a mirror, we see parts we like and parts we don’t like. Sometimes, too often in fact, we become focused on the parts we don’t like to the exclusion of all that is good. Yet God see beyond the mirror into a bit of creation that has been loved since before time began.

Do you understand? To be known by God is to be loved – fully, completely, eternally. There are no hesitations, no questions, no mistakes of commission or omission that can take us away from God’s love. God loves you with a depth and breadth that should steal away your breath if you could actually understand it.

Whatever you believe “love” to mean your understanding is only a shadow of what it means when I say that God loves you.

Now that we’ve begun to describe what love is, let’s go back to the top and answer Tina’s question: What’s love got to do with it? Is it, as she suggests, a “second hand emotion”? Or is it more?

Paul sets us straight. As we are loved by God, we are to reflect that love in all we are and do. This is not a wimpy love that takes everything with a “woe-is-me” sigh, no wasting away with enduring looks or heartfelt sighs. This is hero love, strong love, champion love...the love that bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, and endures all things. This is love that, in spite of all good reason is patient when there is no reason to be, is kind when faced with cruelty, is not worried about getting even or even keeping score.

Paul wrote to a church of “nice” Christians at Corinth who “loved the Lord” and were an embarrassment to their faith. I’ll admit it; I’ve met people who have claimed my faith and have caused me to say that as much as I love Jesus, I sincerely don’t want to have anything to do with them. The words that come out of their mouths demonstrate anything BUT the type of love that Paul describes. Just this week I read of a group of pastors in the US who proclaimed that the hurricanes that have so damaged the country have nothing to do with climate change and everything to do with God punishing people who accept LGBT folk in their midst. Their actions don’t show me a reflection of God love, but a tendency to strain their shoulders ...patting themselves on the back.

Paul wrote to the young church of Colossae and instructed them in their new relationships as children of the Risen Savior. I know some of these people as well, convinced that if they have the RIGHT translation of the Bible and sing the RIGHT hymns and dislike the correct people for the correct sins, then God will have to approve of them and their lives.

Believe it or not, in the US I carried “malpractice insurance” in case one of these people attended my church, transferred to another church and then wanted to sue me because they thought my teachings were not correct, or at least not up to the standards of their new church (until they moved again to a better one yet!)

These are folks for whom salvation is narrow lane which they must walk to prove themselves to God. And throwing “unworthy” people off the lane is a part of the walk.

Does any of this sound like love to you?

Paul certainly didn't think so. Paul gave clear instructions to these two churches on what it meant to BE the church. And the focus was love. It's much the same love that holds couples together 10, 20, 30, 40 50 or even more years.

Do you remember the instructions to Colossae? “...put on a heart of compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience; bearing with one another, and forgiving each other...just as the Lord forgave you, so also should you.”

Lest there be any doubt, Paul makes his position quite clear: “And beyond all these things put on love, which is the perfect bond of unity.”

And how about Paul's words to the proud people of Corinth; he makes it pretty clear that no matter what you do, if not powered and empowered by love, it is meaningless. You have heard those descriptors before, describing what, exactly, love is: patient, kind, not jealous, not arrogant, not one who tallies wrongs suffered. Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

“You've got a lot going for you, Corinth”, says Paul. But keep your head (and heart) straight...what you do in faith is important, sure, and so is that for which you hope. No question about it! However...However: “But now abide faith, hope and love, these three; but the greatest of these is love.

I suspect Tina may have been right when she sang that love, as it's bandied about on a day to day basis is sometimes not much more than a second hand emotion.

But LOVE? Not a little dude in diapers carrying a strange bow (sorry cupid). Not some platonic or courtly affectation that plays well in the matinee or the bustier buster that sells in the evenings at the cinema. Not something to be confused with lust or set in a temporal right here/right now.

No, this is not an emotion or a commitment for the weak or the timid. This love is hard work. It is the hard work of loving the people you encounter, whether they deserve it or not, simply because God loves you. This is loving a partner for the long run, not until the thrill wears off. This is loving God with the very core of your being. This is showing love in all that you do, in all that you are.

For if you don't have love, what good is it?