

January 28, 2007

1 Corinthians 13:1-13

Sermon: "All You Need Is Love – Or Is It?"

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Text: "...*and the greatest of these is love.*"

I suppose I've performed one hundred fifty or more weddings in my professional career. And, although I can't be absolutely certain of this figure, because I haven't checked on every couple I've ever married, I think about 75% of them are still together. Not bad, I suppose, in this time when about fifty percent of all marriages are expected to fail.

Just the other day, I read that Tony Dungy, coach of the Super Bowl-contending team from Indianapolis, the Colts, and one of professional football's 'winningest' coaches, has a win/loss ratio of 60%. So my 75% doesn't sound all that bad, I reckon.

And I think I've seen just about everything happen that you could imagine would happen when it comes to marrying people. I've had brides and grooms faint dead away from fear, and fall (or nearly fall) right there at the altar; two brides, one groom.

I've had to administer mouth-to-mouth resuscitation to an overly anxious father of the bride, while the paramedics made their way to the church while he was having a heart attack.

Once, I even had to break up a duel between two dads – bio-dad and step dad of the bride, who got to fighting over which one was going to walk her down the aisle. I mean, 'duking-it-out' right there in church at the rehearsal, like two glandular schoolboys fighting over a girlfriend. After I nearly took a chop to the chin for stepping in too soon, I got their attention when I threatened to end the wedding right then and there, and the daughter ran off crying, and I congratulated the two morons on their total lack of etiquette and class.

Finally settled the matter 'King Solomon-style' – No! I didn't threaten to cut the bride in two pieces! I suggested that bio-dad, who made a minor contribution to her conception, walk her down the aisle and hand her off to step-dad, who raised her most of her life, and that he stand with her to give her away. Amazing, isn't it?!

“Can’t we all just get along?”

The apostle Paul talks about love in this morning’s reading from First Corinthians, which is one of the most popular passages in the Bible. Without love, Paul seems to say, you are nothing. With love, you have everything. Love is even greater than faith or hope. The “greatest of these is love.”

This morning I want to deal with love. Love in the Christian way. I’m also thinking about marriage, too. Someone asked me once, “Why is it that whenever the church says something about love, they always manage to turn the topic into a discussion of marriage?” Good question.

He was sort of suggesting that Christians really don’t believe in love outside the context of long-term, public commitments that are based on Scripture. And I can go along with that. In fact, I think it can be said that, as Christians, we’re not as much into love as we are into commitment.

Maybe you’ve been to a wedding, as I have, where the pastor has said something like this to the couple being married: “The only

thing you need to remember in your marriage is to love one another. Love overcomes everything. Only love matters.”

Have you ever heard that at a wedding? And do you believe that it’s true? Do you believe the old Beatles song, “Love is all you need . . . all you need is love”?

When you read 1 Corinthians 13, as I did earlier, Paul seems to be saying just this very thing: “Love is all you need.” Only love endures. Love overcomes all things. Faith, hope, love – these are all wonderful virtues – but the greatest of them all is love.

And maybe it’s because our culture has so twisted and perverted the word *love* that I think we need to be careful whenever we use it anymore in a Christian context. In a couple of weeks we’ll be celebrating Valentine’s Day. It’s a holiday that was dreamed up by florists and greeting card manufacturers for sure, a day when romantic love is offered as a cure for anything and everything that ails us. And that line of feel-good nonsense is very appealing, especially in a world where so little love is evident in the things that we normally do with each other, and to each other.

But any of you who have been in love, in a romantic way, know how notoriously short-lived our feelings of romantic love are. And that's not always a bad thing. I mean, part of the joy of romantic love is that it is so fragile; so delicate. It comes upon us so quickly, like a fever, and usually burns out in time. Not entirely, but that earliest fever pitch generally gives way to a longer-lasting, slower burn – not so intense – that allows us to get on with life in a more normal routine.

In a wedding I attended, once, as a member of the family, after the minister had told the couple that all they needed was love, we had an original poem read by a friend of the bride's. And in that poem we were told that what the whole world needed to solve all of its problems was love, love, love. Then we had two songs sung, popular songs, that also celebrated the joys of young love. Love, love, love.

Yet, there was something missing. Something terribly missing in this thoroughly contemporary wedding. God was missing. Marriage was spoken of as an exclusively and purely

human accomplishment, something based on our efforts to love another person. Something based on *our* efforts . . .

And you might get that impression from reading 1 Corinthians 13, that love is something we invent, something we perform, with God being just a spectator. But let me fill in a little of the background to this very important letter. Paul has been begging the people who go to church in Corinth to get along. Just to get along. But now he begs them to love one another. But he does this in a context of their committing themselves deeply to Jesus Christ. Love, Christian love, is a sign of our relationship to Christ, Paul is saying. It is not the cause of our relationship with Christ, or even with each other as brothers and sisters in Christ.

Again: Love results from our faith. It does not cause us to have faith. We love, you and I, because God in Christ has first loved us. And our love is an outflow of that divine love.

If you look carefully at the Marriage Service that is part of the Worship Book for the Presbyterian Church – that’s the service I use at all my weddings – you’ll notice that it mentions love very

little. It seems to be much more interested in talking about commitment. And fidelity. And being true to the promises that are being made. But not a lot of talk about love. Oh sure, it's mentioned, but usually in the context of God's love for us in Christ.

As the marrying minister, I never ask, "John, do you love Susie?" Instead, I ask, "John, do you *promise* to love Susie?" Love is spoken of in the future tense, as part of the promises being made. Most of the couples I marry probably think they are getting married because they love each other. But as I try to explain in the pre-marital sessions with them, and as the worship book declares, love is the result of a commitment in marriage rather than its cause. Love is the fruit of marriage. Love is the fruit of long-term, committed relationships, whatever complexity they may be.

So in marriage, in the church, in any of our human relationships, we don't believe that love is all you need. Our love tends to be short-term and changeable and fickle. What we need is something that keeps us close to people, even when they're

difficult to get close to, and stay close to, and love. We need something to keep our marriages, and our other relationships, even when we don't feel like keeping them. That's why the church stresses things like fidelity and commitment and trust more than it stresses love.

The person who says, "The Christian faith can be summed up in just three words, "God is love," hasn't got it right. At least, not entirely. As Presbyterians, we believe that God is not *only* love, and certainly not *love* as we often use that syrupy, slippery word. We believe (more importantly) that God is sovereign and majestic and holy and mysterious. God is commitment and trust and faithfulness, especially when you and I are not faithful and trustworthy and dependable. So the Old Testament frequently speaks, not just about the love of God, but the *steadfast* love of God. (See the difference?) It's not a deep feeling that makes for Christian love, but long-term endurance.

We believe that it's impossible for mere mortals like us to stay faithful and committed on our own. So we ask God's blessing

upon our marriages and families and in all our personal, loving relationships. Love is a gift from God. It is not a human achievement. So we ask that we be given the grace to love one another as God has loved each of us in Christ – completely, committedly, forever. Love is not all you need. You need God. You need God loving you and forgiving you and judging you and correcting you, and enabling you to pick up and to start over, and giving you the humility to see how difficult you are to love, and making it easier for you to love someone else for all their faults. Love is a gift of God.

Really, it takes three to love. It takes a giver and a receiver. And it takes God.