

I

For a few years in high school and during summer and winter breaks in college, I worked as a waiter in a banquet hall. This time of year, in the late spring and early summer, it wasn't uncommon for us to work two or even sometimes three wedding receptions in the same weekend.

One unfortunate side effect of working all those weddings is that I've witnessed more renditions of the Chicken Dance and the Electric Slide than I care to remember. And if I ever hear Celebration by Kool and the Gang again, it will be too soon.

And of course, after all these years in ministry, I still attend lots of weddings – I just get a much better seat.

II

Most of us, I think, generally enjoy weddings. They're usually happy occasions as families and friends come together to surround a couple as they start a new life together, to mark the moment when a new family is formed. A wedding is a family affair, which can be a double-edged sword, of course, but at a wedding most of us, try to put our best selves forward and smile for the camera. At a wedding, perhaps more than just about any other time, we publicly contemplate together the notion of love.

III

If there were a Spotify playlist of most frequently read Scriptures for wedding services, the text before us this

morning from would be number one on the list, and by a country mile. I would wager that even people who have no particular religious faith are at least vaguely familiar with these words, rightly so, for these words about the enduring nature of love are imminently appropriate as two people make their solemn vows to one another.

But I don't think the man who originally penned these words - a man by the name of Paul - had a young couple in mind when he sat down to write. I think Paul had in mind a whole community that was struggling to live together, that was perilously close to coming apart.

Paul's story is a long and complex one, but suffice it to say that even though Paul wasn't one of Jesus' original 12 disciples, nevertheless, through the work of the Holy Spirit, Paul became the most important writer, theologian, pastor, and church planter in the first century.

I don't imagine that Paul had any idea that 2,000 or so years later you and I would still be reading some of his correspondence. But thanks be to God, our ancestors in the faith have preserved some of our family's old letters. Of the 27 books of the New Testament, nearly half are letters, most of which were written by or attributed to Paul.

So before us today is a section of the Book of First Corinthians, or more formally, Paul's letter to the church in Corinth. Corinth was and still is a major seaport in Greece, situated on a strip of land with access to the sea on both sides.

Consequently, Corinth was a commercial center and a very cosmopolitan city, full of people of different backgrounds and viewpoints and opinions. And the people to whom Paul writes in Corinth are living about 20 years or so after the death and resurrection of Jesus.

And all frequent contact with ships and traders from across the sea, all of that diversity of backgrounds and upbringings and worldviews, all of that had a profound impact on the church in Corinth. On the one hand, it made for a rich tapestry of experience and worldviews. It made for a powerful witness - that all of these people from different backgrounds and worldviews - Jews and Greeks and slaves and free and old and young and poor and wealthy and male and female - all of these people could come together to worship the Lord Jesus Christ. But of course, all of that diversity also provided the fertile seedbed for conflict.

And in Corinth, the conflict centered around a number of questions - questions like, "What does it mean to be baptized, and under whose name?" Questions like, "What is the meaning of the Lord's Supper?" Questions like, "What is the meaning and use of spiritual gifts?" And the list goes on and on.

And so Paul's letter to the Corinthians is the work of a wise pastor trying to address these questions and conflicts that had sprouted among the followers of Jesus, a people who were trying to embrace their diversity and live

together as sisters and brothers in a world that did not value unity and mutuality.

And so listen now for a Word from God from 1 Corinthians 13:1-13.

If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. If I give away all my possessions, and if I hand over my body so that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing.

Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

Love never ends. But as for prophecies, they will come to an end; as for tongues, they will cease; as for knowledge, it will come to an end. For we know only in part, and we prophesy only in part; but when the complete comes, the partial will come to an end. When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child; when I became an adult, I put an end to childish ways. For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known. And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love.

This is the Word of God for the people of God. Thanks be to God.

Paul isn't writing flowery prose to a young couple – he is writing a pastoral word to a church struggling to remember what it means to be followers of Jesus Christ in a broken, hurting, and often frightening world.

The kind of love Paul is describing here isn't the young love celebrated on a wedding day, or even the mature love celebrated on a milestone anniversary. Paul isn't writing about the kind of love that is sort of a mutual regard for a fellow human being or a sense of community solidarity. Paul is writing to the Corinthians, and to you and to me, about the self-emptying love that is lifted up in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth.

IV

In the words of the 20th century theologian Burt Bacharach, what the world needs now is love, sweet love. It's the only thing that there's just too little of.

My goodness, my friend, are these difficult days. There is so much uncertainty, so much grief, and so much anger in our world. And I have a hunch that maybe some of that uncertainty and grief and anger has perhaps made its way into the deepest recesses of your own heart, perhaps in ways that you might not be able to name, but that are real nonetheless.

But my friend, what the world needs from you, what your friends need from you, what your family needs from

you, is not the sugary love of weddings and Valentine's Day, or even the affection and regard you hold for them as a fellow citizen. What the world needs from you right now, my friend, is the self-emptying love modeled for you in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth.

I'll never forget the day that I was a senior in the seminary, just a few weeks from graduation, and our seminary professor was droning on and on about some finer point of theology, and we seniors were pretty checked out and not paying much attention.

She stopped mid-sentence, took off her glasses, leaned out over the podium, and she looked hard at all of us pastors-in-training. And she said, "You know, you don't have to like the people you serve. In fact, some of them you're never going to like, and they're never going to like you. But you have to love them. That's your job – to love your people. And if you find yourself in a place where you cannot love your people, then it's time to find another line of work."

But it strikes me, my friend, that that she wasn't just addressing us as pastors-in-training. She was addressing us as Christians, as those who bear and claim the name of Christ. And so my friend, if you claim the name of Christ for yourself, then know it's your job, even in these strange and stressful days, to love your people. You don't have to like them. Some of them you're never going to like, and they're never going to like you. On the night before his arrest and betrayal, Jesus gathered for dinner with those

whom he loved, one of which he knew was going to betray him, and he didn't say, as I have liked you, so you also should like one another. I'll wager that there were many, many times, that Jesus did not like the disciples at all.

Some of the people God has called you to live with think differently than you do. Some of them look differently than you do. Some of them have different opinions about politics and economics and the key issues of the day than you do. Some of their opinions and ideas are just flat wrong.

You don't have to like them. You don't have to agree with them. But if you claim that Jesus is Lord, then you have to love them. Because you can have all faith so as to move mountains. You can have prophetic powers and understand all mysteries and knowledge. You can give away all of your possessions and sacrifice your very body. But if you don't have the self-emptying love of Jesus Christ in your heart, then you're just adding noise to an already noisy world. Your job, my friend, is to love people with the self-emptying love poured out for you in the cross and resurrection of Jesus. Full stop.

V

These are difficult days in which to be the church of Jesus Christ. There is unrest around the world, across the nation, and down the street. We are more connected, and more disconnected, than any generation that preceded us. As we have all learned in recent years, what happens on one side of the world has the

capacity to quickly affect everyone in the world in profound and unexpected ways.

It's natural, then, in this kind of uncertainty and peril for organizations to draw in on themselves. And so the challenge, in times like these, is for the church to ask the right question.

The question, in times of uncertainty and conflict and peril, isn't "What's best for the bottom line?"

The question isn't, "What would be the most convenient or expedient course of action?"

The question isn't, "When can we return to normal? Or even "Can't we all just get along?"

The right question is this, "What is the next thing to do that most exhibits the love poured out for us on the cross of Jesus Christ?"

As we have learned in recent years, pandemics eventually come to an end. Economic downturns don't last forever. Social unrest will eventually ease. But the love poured out in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth is patient and kind. The love of the Lamb of God is not envious or arrogant or boastful or rude. The love of God's only begotten Son bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, and endures all things.

And because we bear his name, so will we.

Thanks be to God. Amen.