

FOURTH SUNDAY AFTER THE EPIPHANY, C Melinda J. Wagner  
Jeremiah 1:4-10 First Immanuel Lutheran Church  
I CORINTHIANS 13:1-13 Portland, Oregon  
Luke 4:21-30 January 31, 2010

Imagine a beautiful wedding. A church full of murmuring family and friends, glowing candles, the fragrance of roses. A groom straightening his shoulders beneath his fine tuxedo. A bride elegant in satin, her head held high. Together they turn to hear the scripture read:

If I have not love, I am nothing ... Love is patient and kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. Love does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful. ... Love never ends.

Now imagine the same couple years later. Imagine them as parents, days filled with dirty diapers, scraped knees, carpools, teenagers. Hectic schedules and job stresses and money troubles. Imagine conflict – raised voices, slammed doors. Imagine health issues dragging someone down. And hear the same scripture speak again:

If I have not love, I am nothing... Love does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful. ... Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never ends.

This passage, First Corinthians 13, is often called a "hymn to love." When we hear it read at a wedding or the blessing of a union, it often seems like an idealized picture of the perfect fairy-tale relationship. Something we could never quite attain.

This morning, though, we listen to this passage not in an idealized setting but right in the midst of everyday life. And that is a gift. Because these words were originally intended to speak to everyday situations where the romantic glow has long since worn off.

Perhaps you've noticed that romance does tend to fade pretty quickly. I recently saw an explanation of why that happens. It seems there are certain chemicals and hormones that bombard the brain when people "fall in love." They give you a kind of rose-colored perspective toward your partner. But those love chemicals only last so long – to be precise, from 18 months to three years. After that, the rose-colored glasses fall away and couples find themselves wondering, "Is this it? Forever?"

Sometimes it takes a little longer for the downward swing to set in, but eventually it happens to every relationship. And that's when some people begin to fantasize

about finding someone new to recharge those hormones all over again. (see Building Healthy Marriages, Jan 2010, [www.northwestmarriage.org](http://www.northwestmarriage.org)) The danger, of course, is that in our media-saturated culture, people have come to expect instant gratification, for their needs and desires to be met at every moment. And when that doesn't happen, some people get bored and give up.

The point is that there are certain predictable times when a relationship will decline or become depressed. It's a normal fact of life. What love needs is support to get through the predictable low times. We need role models to show us what love looks like beyond the hyped-up, me-centered images our culture feeds us. We need to see what it looks like for love to "bear all things, believe all things, hope all things, and endure all things."

Our scripture provides the kind of role modeling we need. Not specifically for marriage—in fact, these words didn't originally have anything to do with marriage at all. They were written for a congregation in Corinth that was full of conflict and division.

In Corinth, I guess you could say the romantic glow of community had long since faded. It was there once, when they first converted to following Jesus. That was exciting. It changed their lives. But now their love for God and for each other had hit the skids.

By this time, the church in Corinth was full of conflict and backbiting. Some members had taken each other to court over small disagreements they should have been able to work out on their own. They were divided into factions over which former pastor they liked best. For Holy Communion, some people came to the meal early and guzzled all the wine, even got drunk, before the rest of the group even arrived – showing no respect for each other or for Christ's body and blood. Some people who spoke in tongues acted like they were more important than everybody else. There was sexual immorality. There was idol worship. There were uppity women speaking out in church (which is not a problem for us, but apparently it was for them!) The congregation was just generally a mess, but it was still the community of Christ, and Saint Paul, writing as their pastor, was doing his best to direct them in Christ's way.

When you take it in this context, that lofty "hymn to love" sounds a bit different, doesn't it? We start to realize why Paul needed to make it so clear that love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude, insisting on its own way.

Instead, "love is patient, love is kind." These are not vague, abstract virtues. This is love in action, love with a backbone -- intentional and practical love. Love is patient because it has to be. Love is kind because it deliberately rejects the selfish, me-first attitudes that come so naturally.

Love rejects our sinful tendency to live "curved in upon ourselves." Focusing all our energy on "me." Using everything around us, including other people, to fill our desires and needs.

Through Jesus Christ, God empowers us to live another way. God leads us into a way that doesn't take, but gives. A way that doesn't serve myself, but serves others.

Love is the opposite of "curving in upon the self." Love is the act of opening ourselves outward -- reaching up to God, reaching out to others. Christian love means taking action for the good of another, acting in their interest, promoting their well-being, giving of ourselves to them. It's more than a feeling or a caring attitude. Love is an action. Love acts to help others. Love acts with kindness, respect, loyalty, and generosity. In just this one chapter of scripture there are no less than fifteen action verbs that describe what love accomplishes, and what love actively resists.

And if we are looking for something that can last through the hard times, the low times, the stressful times when the rose-colored glow of romantic love or family love or community commitment is failing, there is nothing better than the persevering love that has its root in Christ.

This is the love that bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. The love that never ends.

It is born out of God's love that reached out to us first. Through our Savior who gave of himself first. Saint Paul says that when we live in Christ's love, when we receive the kindness and forgiveness of Jesus and become part of this new people Christ is creating, when we give of ourselves for the well-being of others-- we participate in something that is eternal.

Because Christ's love "never ends." This self-giving way of living lasts forever -- it even continues into the life to come. When our old, tired world has completely passed away, and when Christ's new age has come, the people of God will still be loving in the way Christ has loved us. We will still be loving others, and God will still be loving us.

Paul speaks of three wonderful gifts: faith, hope, and love. Faith is a gift for today, to keep us strong in this lifetime. Hope helps us look ahead to what is yet to be. But love – love carries us all the way through, from this life to the next. "So now, faith, hope and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love."

I commend this beautiful and practical hymn for your prayer and study this week.

Spend some time with it. And as you reflect and pray, just imagine – how this forgiving, enduring, trusting LOVE could have the power to transform those troubled relationships in Corinth – or the troubled relationships in your own life.

Try not to read it with a wedding in mind, a time of fresh beginnings and lofty ideals. Instead, read it with real life struggles in your heart, and pray for God's insight and support in whatever you are facing today.

This scripture was written to direct you in the midst of your most difficult relationships, your thorniest conflicts, and your toughest questions. These are the proving grounds for Christ's way of love. And these are the places where Christ's forgiving love reaches out to you, to lead you in the way.

God bless you. Amen.