

## Repairing Broken Tables

Sunday, January 30, 2022

1 Corinthians 13:1-13 &

Luke 4:21-30

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You may be scratching at your heads to find a connection between the Gospel and Epistle lessons this morning. In Luke, Jesus has just delivered his inaugural sermon as the guest preacher of his hometown synagogue in Nazareth. The response, to put it mildly, has not been overwhelming. Not long after he concludes, the crowd rises against Jesus. They chase him from town and try to throw him over the edge of a cliff. I can only imagine how the person in charge of getting pulpit supply must feel!

Paul, meanwhile, offers his poetic hymn of love. Its stanzas are lovely and full of imagery that defines love. They speak of actions that are exactly the opposite of the crowd at Nazareth, which is one way of seeing how these two passages may be linked. Jesus, in his sermon, has proclaimed a vision of the kingdom of God—a vision that will disrupt the lives of those who are most comfortable. Paul, in his letter, confronts those who have become sources of division and anger within the church – linking his understanding of love to Jesus’ life and ministry.

In the movie “Wedding Crashers,” actors Vince Vaughn and Owen Wilson portray a couple of sleazy womanizers who drop into weddings uninvited to pursue their romantic interests. Midway through one wedding season, Vaughn and Wilson take their seats in a church, and Vaughn asks Wilson to bet on the reading. Without blinking, Wilson says, “1 Corinthians,” and as soon as the pastor begins intoning Paul’s words, Vaughn reaches into his wallet to pay up.

We laugh, only because odds are that if it weren’t for weddings, these words of Paul would never be read aloud. Paul’s poem on love is inscribed upon our hearts, permanently superimposed over gauzy images of romantic weddings, with grooms and brides staring glowingly at each other, surrounded by adoring parents and wedding parties, adorable ring bearers and junior bride’s maids who have walked down the aisle either too fast or too slow. Then, on cue, Paul’s ancient words are heard anew:

<sup>4</sup> Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant <sup>5</sup> or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; <sup>6</sup> it does not rejoice in wrongdoing but rejoices in the truth. <sup>7</sup> It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things....love never ends.”

Paul’s words are lovely, moving, impassioned—they are a love song celebrating the love and joy expressed in marriage and friendship. But if we are to understand their true impact, we should less about weddings and more about divorce -- or at least a trial separation. 1 Corinthians 13 is not just for weddings anymore but is instead a text with practical applications that lifts us toward new visions of God’s astonishing purpose and promise.

They are words to be read at weddings, but also at funerals, where decades of a life shaped by these qualities is celebrated. They are words that remind us of the ways we are called to live in love, dwelling not in self-interest and narcissistic preoccupation, but gathered into a rich and diverse community. There are several words in Greek for love – love of friends is called *philia*; romantic love is called *eros*; and God’s unlimited love is *agape*. Paul’s words which challenge us – you and I – to become a church oriented toward the sharing of *agape*—a community charged by Jesus in Luke 4 to proclaim good news to the poor, release to the captives, recovery of sight to the blind, and freedom to those oppressed

Theologian Jurgen Moltmann puts our challenge this way: the church is a fellowship of hope, a community called to enact and remember the story of Jesus Christ so that others are freed from the compulsions and drives of society so that they may live a life shaped by Christ.

Paul’s words, so lovely and beautiful, were never intended to be heard only at weddings. They weren’t meant to be solely wedded to romance, or only seen as sentimental monuments of wedded bliss, written on cards embellished with flowers and shimmering with glitter. To do so would become nothing more than clanging brass, or the empty rattle of tin cans tied to a car that is going nowhere, a sound of a grossly out of tune middle school band.

There’s more in here than kind words to be read at weddings. They were, in fact, words aimed at people who couldn’t stand each other. The Corinthians weren’t in love, they were at each other’s throats. Their factiousness and division threatened to unravel the threads of sacred community. In their impatience and selfishness, the Corinthians displayed the exact opposite of Christ’s *agapeic* self-emptying love.

Paul’s argument for the surpassing value of love has been building since the early chapters of 1 Corinthians. Here he reveals their full force and their utter practicality: they are words, that reveal, as theologian Lewis Smedes once said, “the liberating power that moves us toward our neighbor with no demand for rewards.”

As such, we limit their power when we only read them at weddings.

Change the context, a bit, and think about the impact of Paul’s words if they were read at the end of a deeply contested marital separation, not to encourage the recovery of a marriage, but to uphold the promises of honoring each other with kindness in parting.

Imagine them read across the borderlands of Ukraine and the Crimean Peninsula. Think of the power they would have in worship shared by Palestinian Christians, Muslims, and Israeli Jews. Imagine them read outside neighborhoods in north St. Louis where children are shot by stray bullets, or inside the halls of government where divisions multiply like cancer.

Hear them on the lips of doctors and nurses before surgery, or shared at the opening of a food pantry, studied in nursing homes. The words of love describe our calling to be people who yield to the power of love, overcoming resentment and bigotry, and lowering the burning flames of all-consuming hatred.

Read them before you head out on a mission project, or when you get up for work, and begin to understand how Paul imagines the power of God at work in this world. Read them before you head over to the DMV or prepare your taxes and understand how the power of love might change you. Pray them. Read them. Ingest them.

Let us become the church that looks for ways to love—loving, as the writer of 1 John says, not only in word or speech, but in deed and truth.

It's not the way it happened, but imagine Paul in his office, reviewing his correspondence. All of a sudden, his aide bursts into the room with a scroll from Corinth. The aide trembles with urgency as he places it on Paul's desk. "Boss," he says, "You've got to read this now." Imagine Paul pulling out what little hair he had left, slamming his hand down on the desk, grabbing his pen and letting ink fly across the page:

"I will show you the most excellent way," he writes. He pulls them away from their self-centered preoccupation with status and reminds them that all the gifts God has given-- spiritual gifts like insight and wisdom, speech, tongues, ecstatic experiences, even generosity—without love none of these matter. They are, he says, nothing more than the discordant noise of clanging brass.

The way of love, says Paul, shapes the church in such a way that it becomes reconstituted as the Body of Christ. The way of love values those who have been told they are worthless. The way of love frees us from the shackles of loneliness and selfishness, creating bonds of community, rebuilding foundations torn apart by ungodly powers.

Love is patient, kind, not envious or boastful or arrogant.

Love, Paul reminds them, is the force that allows community to become places where the chaos of division is healed, infused with the gospel that brings healing. Love enables us to rebuild the broken tables of community.

Maybe you have seen the video that has been flashing around the Internet for some time. It apparently was originally shown on an old episode of "American's Funniest Home Videos," but has since been resurrected on social media. The grainy video shows a little boy placing bricks on the top of a glass dining room table. For whatever reason, the boy has built a stack of bricks about three feet high, which, not surprisingly, suddenly causes the glass to shatter. The ends of the table fly in different directions as the bricks go straight to the floor, while the little boy's rather surprised voice is heard saying, "Oh no! Our table ... is broken!"

You have to wonder if an adult was operating the camera. How surprised could the boy have been? If you keep piling bricks on a glass table, the result is inevitable!

Our calling, as Paul reminds us, is to rebuild broken tables, mending relationships and offering healing. We are called to disrupt the processes that place bricks of hatred on others, and to find ways of mending the tables of community which have crumbled under the weight of sin and anger. that

have crumbled under Paul reminds the Corinthians of the very same thing: he looks around at their dissension and disunity and declares, “Your table is broken, but there is a more excellent way.” Amen.

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