

Love with Its Work Clothes on

1 Corinthians 13

Martin B. Copenhaver

Wellesley Congregational Church (UCC), Wellesley, Massachusetts

This passage from Paul's first letter to the church in Corinth is one of the most beloved passages in all of scripture. It is a particular favorite at wedding ceremonies. Even brides and grooms who are relatively unfamiliar with scripture often request it, sometimes by saying things like, "We'd like to include that love passage. How does that go?" And it *is* a beautiful hymn to love. Paul, whose writing often can be dense and opaque, here soars to rarefied heights of lyricism, made all the more remarkable by the fact that he dictated his letters. (Amazing! I picture Paul's secretary stringing pearls together as they drop from his mouth.) So what better words to spin around a couple as they make vows of love? What could be more appropriate than this beautiful tribute to the enduring power of love?

It is interesting to note, however, that the setting of this passage in Paul's letter is quite different from the setting in which we usually place it. Paul here is not talking about love in marriage, although what he writes can be applied to such relationships. Rather, what Paul is addressing here is love in the church. What is more, he is not addressing the Corinthians on a special occasion when everyone is aglow, reveling in the bonds of Christian fellowship—say, just after they have sung a harmonious version of "Blessed Be the Tie That Binds." Rather, Paul speaks this way about love in a letter addressed to people who are at each other's throats. Instead of picturing people all aglow on a joyful occasion, picture these words addressed to people who are in a white heat of conflict. Paul is not addressing two people who are choosing to be bound to one another; he is addressing a community of people who have found that the tie binds, indeed. It binds and chaffs.

Here is a bit of background: individual members of the Corinthian church were parading their spirituality, comparing themselves to one another and boasting of their superior spiritual gifts, in a classic "mine is better than yours is" kind of confrontation. Paul responded by saying that there are many gifts, people have different gifts, and each gift is valuable because it can be used to benefit the community of faith. We are like different members of the same body, the body of Christ.

We have different gifts. Some have the gift of wisdom, others the gift of discernment, still others the gift of faith. Of all the spiritual gifts, there is only one that is promised to all. Not everyone is expected to have the gift of wisdom or discernment or even faith. There is only one gift of the Spirit that is promised to all, and it is the only gift that is in some way required of all. And that is love. That is the only spiritual gift that is given to everyone. And it is the only spiritual gift that we are all called upon to exhibit.

Love is a gift of the Spirit that is promised to all because the very nature of God is love. Love is not just an attribute of God, but God's very essence. We are promised the gift of love because God does not withhold God's own self from us.

If God's gift of love is promised to all, so too all are called to reflect that gift of love. Indeed, the life of a community—if it is a community of two in marriage or a

community of many in a church—depends upon love for its very existence. A marriage can survive where only one has wisdom or courage, but a marriage cannot long survive where only one has love. Likewise, a church can get along just fine where only some are particularly gifted with faith or the ability to heal. But a church cannot long survive, and certainly cannot fulfill its calling, if only some exhibit the gift of love. Love is the gift that is promised to all, and it is the gift that is required of all.

But how can one speak of “requiring” love? We cannot make ourselves feel a certain way about another person, because we cannot feel on command. And if we happen to feel lovingly toward someone at one moment, there is no guarantee that we will feel that same way about the person at another time. George S. Kaufman told Irving Berlin that the lyrics of his song “Always” were unrealistic. Instead of “I’ll be loving you, always,” Kaufman suggested, “I’ll be loving you, Thursday.”

So how can we be required to exhibit the spiritual gift of love, when love is fickle and so clearly out of our control, not subject to the command of another or our own will? Because the love that Paul commends here is a particular kind of love. It isn’t the kind of love that we would recognize from the ways in which the word is commonly used, in popular songs and on greeting cards. This is not romantic love we’re talking about here or even brotherly-sisterly love, but the kind of love God exhibits. The love that Paul commends here is not an emotion, but a form of life that is characterized by self-giving—that is, a Christ-shaped life.

This explains the otherwise strange fact that Paul can go on at length about the gift of love and never once speak of it as an emotion. Instead, here love is described as a way of being and acting. And that way of acting is not soft, sentimental, or in any way mushy. Rather, the love that Paul praises is strong enough and resilient enough that it does not need to assert itself, but rather is free to give of itself.

Since such love is a form of life, a cruciform way of life, it is most appropriate to ask not “What does it feel like?” but rather “What does it look like?” That is, it is characterized by actions rather than emotions. What does this love look like? According to Paul, it sure doesn’t look like jealousy or boasting or arrogance, rudeness, or resentment. It looks an awful lot like patience, like kindness, like endurance.

Notice that in the marriage ceremony, we do not ask the bride and groom, “Do you love one another?” Rather, we ask, “*Will* you love one another?” If the love we ask them to affirm were an emotion, we might expect the response, “How do I know if I’m going to love him? This is only Thursday!” But, here, as elsewhere, the Gospel seems remarkably uninterested in how we feel and is keenly interested in how we act. So when we ask the question, “Will you love this man? Will you love this woman?” we are not asking the couple to predict how they will feel. Rather, we are asking them to promise to act in a certain way. Will you act in a loving manner, no matter how you feel? Will you put aside boasting and arrogance and rudeness and practice instead acts of patience and kindness—not because you are feeling particularly loving, but perhaps in spite of how you feel in that moment?

My father, drawing on his work as a minister, used to say, “I have concluded that there is one thing necessary for a marriage to succeed. Just one thing.” When I was younger, I used to dislike it when he would make sweeping statements like that. One thing? It can’t be as simple as one thing. And when I wouldn’t ask him what that one thing is, he would tell me anyway: “Emotional maturity,” he would say. “Both parties need to be emotionally mature. That’s the one thing necessary.” When I was

younger, I always found that entirely unsatisfying. What about compatibility? What about an ability to communicate?

But now, many years later—now that I am about the age my father was when he would make statements like that—I think he was right. For a marriage to succeed, having compatible values helps. The ability to communicate is important. We could extend the list, but checking off everything on the completed list will not assure a successful marriage if the two parties lack emotional maturity. It takes adults, or people willing to become adults, or at least act like adults, for a marriage to succeed. And the same is true of other relationships as well.

And what does “emotional maturity” look like? Well, it sure doesn’t look like jealousy or boasting or arrogance or rudeness or resentment. It looks an awful lot like patience, like kindness, like endurance. In other words, what my father called emotional maturity looks like Paul’s description of love—not an emotion, but a way of acting. It is love with its work clothes on.

Consider that word “endure.” In the kind of love we are talking about here, endurance is promised and required as well. I really like the story about a couple celebrating their fortieth wedding anniversary with a quiet dinner for two. The wife picks up her champagne glass, looks her beloved in the eyes, and says, “In spite of everything.” Saint Valentine would not approve, but Saint Paul would understand. After all, it was Paul who wrote, “Love bears all things... *endures* all things,” which is another way of saying that love endures because it puts up with a lot.

And, again, that is not just true in marriage or other relationships between partners. It’s true in any relationship. A while back I was talking with someone who was reflecting on the challenge of relating on an ongoing basis with someone who is particularly difficult. She said, “It’s an endurance test. That’s what it is—it’s an endurance test.” Later I thought, “What a great description.” After all, “to endure” means two different things—to put up with a lot and to last. Two different meanings, and yet, in loving relationships, those two meanings are inextricably related. Love *endures* all things.

That kind of enduring love does not come naturally to us. If you need any verification of that statement, try substituting your name for the word “love” in this passage: “Martin is patient and kind; Martin is not jealous or boastful; Martin is not arrogant or rude. Martin does not insist on his own way...” (Well, let’s just leave it at that, shall we? I think you get the idea. If you want a humbling experience, you can try that when you get home, using your own name.)

And let me show you what I mean when I say that the love Paul describes here is a Christ-shaped love. Try substituting the name of Jesus for love in that passage and listen to how it sounds: “Jesus is patient and kind; Jesus is not jealous or boastful; Jesus is not arrogant or rude. Jesus does not insist on his own way; Jesus is not irritable or resentful; Jesus does not rejoice at wrong, but rejoices in the right. Jesus bears all things, believes all things, endures all things.” Now *that* substitution is quite different, isn’t it? Different and fitting.

But the love of which Paul speaks, unlike romantic love, or a mother’s love for her children, does not come naturally to us. It is so clearly beyond us that we can only receive it as a gift from the one who knows how to love in this way, a gift from the one whose very nature is love.

How we pass along that gift in our own lives is bound to be on a very human

scale. We will almost certainly express perfect love imperfectly. After all, as Paul puts it, “Now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face.” That is, there will come a time when we will see one another as Christ sees us, face to face, with the kind of clarity that love permits. There will come a time, Paul affirms, when we will love one another in such a way, and it will come as naturally to us as it did to Christ. And in the meantime, there is plenty to do, certainly enough to keep us very busy, as we act out the love that we cannot yet fully claim as our own. It is always a good time to put on love’s work clothes.