

Today we celebrate the feast of our patron saint, St. Paul. And we heard one of his greatest hits today for our Epistle reading: 1Corinthians 13.

We associate this chapter with weddings. Even Hollywood has figured it out. In the 2005 movie, *The Wedding Crashers*, Owen Wilson and Vince Vaughn play two sleazy guys who show up uninvited to weddings in order to pick up women who might be in a romantic mood. As they're sitting in one wedding that they've crashed, the time comes for the reading.

Owen says, "Twenty bucks, First Corinthians."

Vince replies, "Double or nothing, Colossians 3:12."

And the reader begins, "And now a reading from Paul's first letter to the Corinthians."

It's a good bet. I've done more than 100 weddings. Perhaps 20% of them have had Colossians 3: "Above all, clothe yourselves with love."¹ It's a good reading.

But more than 50% of the weddings I have done have had 1Corinthians 13 as one of the readings: "Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude... faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love."²

1Corinthians 13 is a wonderful wedding reading. And as I often say in a wedding homily, the love that St. Paul is talking about is the same kind of self-sacrificing love that Jesus showed for us. In John, Jesus says, "I give you a new commandment, that you love one another, just as I have loved you."³

And how much did Jesus love us? Enough to die for us. Enough to give himself totally for us. That's the kind of love Paul is talking about in 1Corinthians 13. That's the kind of love 2 spouses are called to have for each other if they're going to build a Christian marriage.

That's why Paul's words are so appropriate at a wedding:

"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."⁴

These words are not some sweet or syrupy romantic statement. They are words of self-sacrificing love, a love willing to give of yourself for the one you love, just as Jesus gave of himself for all of us.

And building a marriage, growing in that kind of love takes intentionality, and it takes hard work.

¹ Col 3:14

² 1Cor 13:4-5, 13

³ John 13:34

⁴ 1Cor 13:4-8

A few weeks ago, our daughter Lisa was channel surfing and landed on a show that shocked me at first. I thought it was the worst idea for a reality show in the history of television. I thought it was new evidence for the decline and fall of Western civilization. The show was titled, *Married at First Sight*. The premise is that couples would meet each other at the altar for the first time in an arranged marriage. They would stay together for 6 weeks. And then they would decide if they would get divorced or continued to stay married.

My first thought was, "You've got to be kidding. They're treating marriage like some sort of game show." But as we watched it, Renee, Lisa, and I got hooked. Turns out the marriages were not being undertaken cavalierly. The couples were not being put together randomly by TV producers. Instead, they were matched up by a team of marriage therapists of various disciplines, and those therapists would continue to work with the couples as they tried to build their marriage.

What these couples have to do in a short period of time is to start from scratch and grow in friendship, and intimacy, and in love. Other couples might take years to build such relationships, before and after their marriages. And there are many couples in our society who never build their relationships on good foundations and their marriages eventually crash.

But these couples on *Married at First Sight* have to be extremely intentional about building up their relationships. Otherwise they'll never make it out of the starting gate. If their marriages are going to be successful, they'll have to focus on loving each other with the kind of love Paul is talking about, a love which is patient, kind, self-sacrificing. A love which does not insist on having your own way. If you don't have this kind of love, Paul tells us, no matter what else you do, you won't gain anything.

The love that Paul is talking about is never love that comes from us. It always begins with God, and flows through us. Ideally, for a married couple, this love will bind them together. But it will also flow through them to others. In our standard wedding service, when we pray for the couple we ask for this kind of love with these words: "Give them such fulfillment of their mutual affection that they may reach out in love and concern for others." We also pray, "Make their life together a sign of Christ's love to this sinful and broken world, that unity may overcome estrangement forgiveness heal guilt, and joy conquer despair."⁵

When a couple is able to build a Christian marriage, God's love will not only bind them to each other. It will also flow out from them to others. This is why 1Corinthians 13 is a great reading for weddings.

But Paul did not sit down some 1,963 years ago to write these words so that we'd have something to read at weddings in the 21st century.

No. Paul was writing these words for a very different purpose. He was writing to what is perhaps the most divided and dysfunctional church that we know about in the New Testament period. The church in Corinth was plagued by divisions and factions and dissensions.

⁵ *The Book of Common Prayer*, p. 429

Paul is writing to the Corinthian Christians asking them and exhorting them to love one another. They were being pulled apart by different controversies. Their common life was strained. The factions and divisions of the world around them were leaking into the church and causing spiritual problems.

It is to this group that Paul writes these incredible words of love. Paul is saying, it's not enough to have great faith. It's not enough to have great spiritual gifts. It's not enough to give all your money to the poor. It's not even enough to give yourself up to martyrdom.⁶ If you're doing these things, but not doing them in love, then you've missed the entire point. "If I (do all these things) but do not have love, I gain nothing."⁷

Paul is calling the church to be a loving community. Paul is calling the members of the church to forgive each other their mutual faults and not to keep score of wrongdoings. Paul is calling the members of the church to love each other in the same way that God loves them. He calls them to forsake spiritual immaturity. He says "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."⁸

This love for one another was one of the primary reasons for the growth of the early church. 1,800 years ago, the great Christian theologian Tertullian wrote of the way that pagans viewed Christians in his society. He says, "It is mainly the deeds of a love so noble that lead many to put a brand upon us. 'See,' they say, 'how they love one another... how they are ready even to die for one another.'"⁹ It was love for each other that distinguished the early Christians.

One of the important scholars focusing on the growth of the early church is Rodney Stark. He writes extensively about the way that the early Christian believers treated one another differently than the cultural norms around them. He argues that this love for each other led to the growth of Christianity, from about 7,500 members around the year 100, to 6.3 million members by the year 300.

Why? Why this growth even though the church was persecuted?

Stark argues that it is because of the way Christians treated each other. Their love for each other set them apart from the culture around them. And the love they had for each other overflowed to those around them.

To quote a lengthy bit of Stark:

"Christianity revitalized life in Greco-Roman cities by providing new norms and new kinds of social relationships able to cope with many urgent urban problems. To cities filled with the homeless and impoverished, Christianity offered charity as well as hope. To cities filled with newcomers and strangers, Christianity offered an immediate basis for attachments. To cities

⁶ 1Cor 13:1-3

⁷ 1Cor 13:3

⁸ 1Cor 13:11

⁹ *Apologeticum* 39:7

filled with orphans and widows, Christianity provided a new and expanded sense of family. To cities torn by violent ethnic strife, Christianity offered a new basis for social solidarity."¹⁰

In other words, the kind of love Christians had for each other, and the way the showed love for others outside their immediate circles set them apart, and led to their growth even during a time of persecution.

We live in a time of great stress as well. We live in a time of increasing polarization and factionalization. How will we respond?

Our patron saint, St. Paul, would urge us to love one another, to have the same kind of love for each other that God has for us.

Worship is important. Our beautiful building (and music) are assets. We strive to serve our neighbors in Jesus' name. But if we do all of these things, but don't have love, Paul tells us that we gain nothing.

"Faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love."

¹⁰ *The Rise of Christianity--How the Obscure, Marginal Jesus Movement Became the Dominant Religious Force in the Western World in a Few Centuries* p 161