

How do I love thee? Let me count the ways? I love thee to the depth and breadth and height my soul can reach when feeling out of sight...

Until you leave the toilet seat up, until you forget to pick up your dirty socks, until you don't give me my alone time in the bathroom on my phone. Until you forget the most important item on the grocery list or to gas up before our road trip... into the boonies where there's no cell service.

Oh, just to let you know. I know in the past few weeks, I've used stories from my marriage to get a point across. I promise you none of these are characteristic of my relationship with Becky. At least not directly and intentionally, and certainly not anymore so than any of your relationships...

But looking inside any household, we must ask, how fickle is love? Especially when it is based on emotions. Yet even when we know love is broader than just feelings and must include our actions, we will see that it is, at best, like an old raggedy dishcloth, full of holes, frayed at the edges.

We usually hear Paul's words at weddings. But he didn't have marriage in mind when he wrote this. He wasn't admonishing a specific household, or even couples as a whole. He was speaking to a Church, a church well endowed with godly gifts, with excitement for the faith and the work Paul was doing. They had so much, but they weren't really using the gifts well... Paul was speaking to a Church of children.

They had received wonderful gifts from God for the building up of the Church, for the spreading of the glorious Gospel which they had wholeheartedly received. Tongues and interpretation, prophecy and miracles, all gifts that God had lavished upon them that others might see and believe in the wonder of Christ, incarnate and crucified for them. And yet they got distracted. It became a competition of who could speak the loudest and longest, who could be the most impressive, who had the most gifts, or the best gifts. It became a spiritual competition.

Yet everything that they had received, even the things that they were using to one up the other, were wonderful. But they were made into tools to be better than the neighbour rather than tools to

serve the neighbour. They had become means to bring about self-pleasure in the euphoria of spiritual gifts rather than the building up of the body, and the goal of incorporating more into the body.

Everything had boiled down to how do I make myself feel and look better, so Paul lays it down. Better than any of these magnificent gifts from God, better than anything they could know or say or do, was love. This is the more excellent way.

In our church today, in all Churches that exist in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, we might see that not much has changed. We can still be just as childish, just as self-focused, just as curved in our own desires, needs, and interests. This is that sin thing that we are always talking about—it takes even our best intentions as Christians and makes from them a bargaining tool. If I... then they... For instance: If I preach a more entertaining sermon, then they'll give me more compliments and then I can leave today happier. If I do some more visits, then they'll give more good reports and my ego can puff up a little bit—"you mean the old people like little ole me?" If I get here early to shovel the side walk, then... If I clean the bathrooms at home then... if I, if I, if I...

None of those things are bad (well, the entertaining sermon can be bad if it sacrifices the preaching of God's Word, but that's another sermon). But even my best works, because I remain a sinner, they always pose a risk of serving myself. The same goes for all of us.

If I have the rightest doctrine, if I run the tightest ship in my classroom, if I drive the speed limit, if I watch my mouth, if I donate the most money or food, if I give the most of my time, if I care for the unlovable the most, then what? All of these are wonderful. But if done without love, are useless. Even if you, as Paul says, have faith to move the mountains, as Christ said we would, but live with such a faith without love, you've got nothing.

But this text often excites us. I'm in love, we say. I love my spouse, my kids, my coworkers, my brothers and sisters in Christ, my neighbours. I love them, so therefore I must also possess all these wonderful qualities Paul lists here.

Yet, this text is sobering, because the reality is not that if we have love, then we possess all these qualities, but we must assess from the other direction. Though it might appear that I have love, though it might feel like I have love, though others might even see loving actions coming from me, if my intentions are to inflate my ego or say “I did it. They can all thank me” then I’m missing love. Or if I’m steaming from my ears the entire time when I helping a friend move or thinking of all the ways they should repay me if they actually appreciate the amount of time I am putting into their birthday party or whatever I am helping them with, then this is not love. If patience is missing, or kindness is taking a vacation, or if my mind is filled with jealousy over what others are doing in their free, undonated time; if I’m boasting about how much I am loving someone or if my words are brash and harsh in the meantime, love is missing. If I’m “speaking the truth in love” but it comes out as a slap in the face, or if the one I’m “loving” is grating on my ears, I’m not in the process of loving.

So, I guess what I’m saying, is that I’m a great pretend lover. I can put on a great show of love and affection for many, but if you had the superpower to read minds you’d know another story.

Like I said. This reading is sobering. It’s a bucket of ice water to the face when we hear Paul’s words of love and look at what we try to present as love. And no matter how much you focus on loving, how much patience you try to stir up, how much kindness you want to show, no matter how much love you want to give, this text is going to tell you that at best, you’re kind of loving.

But there is another love, a love less fickle, a love more enduring than ours. The love which Paul is describing and urging the Corinthians, and you and I, to live up to, is Christ, the love of God incarnate.

When we hear this passage in Corinthians as a description of God’s love, this becomes a lot less terrifying.

Love is patient. Certainly God’s love towards His creation has been. He promised Adam and Eve restoration rather than just starting over. He did not wipe away the Israelites each time they turned their back on Him and forsook His ways. He hasn’t yet sent a meteor from outer space to land on my

own head whenever I sin. Not even when someone blasphemes His name does He bring about the wrath that He has every right to dish out.

And His kindness can't be escaped. We have water, we have sunshine. We have corn and bacon and apples and oranges. We have mountains and tiny children and the ability to create games and tell stories. So much in this world has the capability to bring about so much joy in our lives, all because He wanted to create a world for us to enjoy—and He has kept it going, even when we have messed it up. And then to top it off, out of His pure kindness He gave us His only and beloved Son, Christ...

who did not envy or boast, but lived to serve the needs of others. He was not jealous of their time (even though we know that God is jealous over those whom He has made—He would love nothing else than all enjoy the salvation which He has prepared for all). But Christ did not force people to hang around Him, nor was He brash with them—at least not in a sinful way which we seem to be so good at...

But the biggest different between Christ, the love of God, and our love, is that it doesn't end. Where we have love and then lose it as our needs and emotions fluctuate, Christ and His loving care for those whom He dwelt among persisted. It endured through questioning and whipping, it endured through a thorn pierced brow and nail pierced hands and feet. He endured, loving in intention, emotion, and action, even through the abandonment of His own eternal Father. And not even this brought love to an end. No, it rested then it rose, love victorious over sin and even death as Christ stepped out of the tomb to proclaim the resurrection of the dead and eternal life for all who would believe such good news.

This is the love that brought us together, the love that brought the Corinthians together. This love has called us out of darkness into His marvelous light of salvation and love. But it would appear that not even this love is able to squash out our unlove—not entirely. Well, the reality is, not yet. It has certainly been done away with, our selfish desires and intentions buried in our watery grave, but they

are good swimmers, they cry up out of the depths and cause us to reach down to grab their hand, despite the love that we been shown, the love we've known, the love in which we've grown.

And so there remains this double reality. Love and unlove, the selflessness of Christ dwelling in us and the selfishness of us, the saint and the sinner coexisting—and not terribly peacefully. But this is our life. So at times we will hear Paul's words and you might say "Pastor Scott, you're being too harsh. I'm loving, as far as I can tell. Honestly! I'm not just saying that to make you think I'm a good person."

That's awesome. In those moments, I believe you. Christ is doing good work in you and making you look like Him, living a cross-shaped, others-focussed life.

Other times you'll be like me and each word that Paul wrote will be like an arrow to your heart, your conscience shred to pieces. Then at most, I hope you say, "Lord have mercy on me a sinner." Because then and there, Christ is doing good work in you, making you look like Him, living a cross-shaped, others-focused life.

Ultimately, this text ought to make us look at God, who is love, and Christ, the person of God whom humanity can see with our eyes and touch with our hands and hold onto for dear eternal life. Rather than primarily affirming how good at loving we're doing or even evaluating how much we should be despairing of ourselves, this text acts for us like an Icon in the Eastern Church.

For them, the picture of Jesus, the icon of Christ, is written (that's correct, they're written, not drawn) and through them they believe they can see beyond, or through, the picture to Christ Himself, like a window into heaven. Now, while I don't agree with the theology entirely, we do believe that we can see Christ and who He is through His Word. And in this Word from Paul, we see just how Christ loves, who He is as a person of God for us. This isn't a passion narrative and yet we hear of what He demonstrated for us as His He bled for us. And as we meditate on this text, as we contemplate just how great His love is for us, just how pure His love is for us, just how much His love is for us, our eyes will be torn off of ourselves, of our own desires and ego, off of our own skills and personalities, off of anything

that might be attributed to us—our positive gifts or our negative traits—and we see nothing but Christ, and Him crucified, for us in love.

And then, with Him in view, as the one who has died for us, we will be like the Corinthians, sent out into the neighbourhood with many gifts, gifts of more variety than you can imagine. With this love before us and behind us, we can trust in and proclaim Christ and Him crucified for the whole world, and each and every individual in it. This is how He works His love in us, whether we can see it or not.

And this love, for you and me, will endure until the day when our gifts will become obsolete in His glorious presence, our hope at last realized, our faith turned to sight. In that day, all who heard and held onto His love will know it fully, more than you can even imagine today. Today's gift of love, in forgiveness, in His Word, in His body and blood, is a mere portion of the total love He will lavish upon you for the rest of eternity.

Christ, hold us fast in our hope and faith until the day when we know your love in its fullness.

Amen.