

LOVE

1 Corinthians 13

You are probably thinking that the pastor is all messed up. We are supposed to have Holy Communion after the sermon, not before. What's going on? Please hold that thought.

Once upon a time there was a beautiful valley. The fields were filled with grains of wheat and corn, the orchards bursting with apples, oranges, and nuts, the pastures of lush green with grazing cattle and sheep, barns neat and painted red, the houses of the village clean and decorated with flower boxes. Everyone dwelt in happiness until a shadow appeared over the land. An evil dragon came and poisoned the river that led through the valley. Crops failed and animals died. The dragon seized the princess of the land and took her back to his castle.

The people of the land struggled to stay alive. As the years went on they realized as long as the princess was held captive in the dragon's castle, they would continue to suffer. So they began to identify among themselves those brave and strong enough to defeat the dragon. They promised that whoever rescued the princess could have her hand in marriage. Young men looked up at the tower in the dragon's castle where the princess was imprisoned. They saw how beautiful she was and eagerly lined up to be the hero. She looked at the first volunteer—tall, dark, and handsome—and said, “There he is!” But when the young man came face-to-face with the dragon, he ran away in terror. Several others did too. One bravely tried to face the dragon, but was burnt to a crisp by the fire from the dragon's mouth. Soon all the would-be heroes fled in a panic.

The people of the valley sent out messengers to other villages. Was there a brave hero who could come forward and be our champion who could defeat the dragon? Young men came to the village. They looked so capable and strong. The princess looked out from the tower and thought, “Surely, one of them has to be my hero.” But the dragon destroyed one prince with fire, gobbled another down, and flung one with his tail into another land. The rest fled in fear. Would they ever find someone to rescue the beautiful princess and restore their valley?

Then a new volunteer stepped forward who had been sent by a wise king. He was no handsome prince. He was an ogre with a hunched back, green colored skin, and the ugliest face in the world. The people laughed when the ogre said, “I will fight the dragon.” But their laughter quieted as the ogre went forward to the dragon's castle. Seeing him from her tower, the princess thought, “Who is this? He can't be my champion, can he?”

The dragon breathed his fire on the ogre and slashed out at him with his tail, but the ogre deftly dodged the dragon's blows and thrust his sword into the dragon's breast. The dragon fell over dead. The princess was free! But was this ugly dragon to be her champion? Would she

have to spend the rest of her life with this ugly beast? Would he turn into a handsome prince, like the story of the frog who was kissed by a princess?

Fairy tales often end with the word, “And they all lived happily ever after.” God’s Word is not fairy tales. Instead of beginning with the words, “Once upon a time,” stories in the Bible often begin with the words, “And it came to pass.” Yet the words of 1 Corinthians 13, St. Paul’s famous “love chapter,” are so often tied in with a “fairy tale” way of doing a wedding. They are the very words that the United Kingdom’s Prime Minister Tony Blair read from the Bible at Princess Di’s funeral. So when we hear about “love,” it is easy to see love as a wonderful, warm feeling that two people have for each other as they look into each other’s eyes and say, “I love you.”

Then why a year later or 20 years later when the kids grow up do these couples split? They say, “We don’t love each other anymore.” What happened to that love?

Paul didn’t write those words for a wedding ceremony or for a Hollywood script. He wrote then in the context of a discussion of spiritual gifts. Some Christians were using the gifts they had to show how they were better than other Christians. Paul was showing that love, real love, puts the other person first. It is not about “me,” but about “others.”

Our view of love is often different. We say, “I love you,” but what we really mean is that we love ourselves enough that we want the affection and attention that we get from that other person. We love to get love in return. It is like, “I’ll scratch your back, if you scratch mine.” Jesus put it this way in Luke 7:

Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you. If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? Even “sinners” love those who love them. And if you do good to those who do good for you, what credit is that to you? Even “sinners” do that. But love your enemies, do good to them, and lend without expecting to get anything back.

Real love is to love without any strings attached, without any conditions, without anything in return. To love is to love as God loves us.

So what happened when the princess kissed the ogre? Did he become Prince Charming? You may have recognized that the story is an adaptation of the movie “Shrek.” In it the princess becomes not so beautiful. Her hair loses its perfect curls, her eyes become weak, her figure plump, her nose pointed, her teeth crooked, and her face full of pimples. Actually, she doesn’t change; she just appears for who she really is—warts and all. Yet, the ogre loves her.

God loves us—not because we’re lovable. He loves us not because we have something to offer to Him. He loves us not because we’re pretty or handsome or talented or attractive or rich. He sees us for what we really are—warts and all. Our sins are ugly, repugnant to Him. Yet He loves us, loves us so much that He died on the cross for us, not so we magically become beautiful, but so we realize how much He loves us.

That love moves us to love, to love as he does. It gives us a different picture of love than the fairy tale wedding where everyone looks beautiful. That love is a feeling, an emotion which can pass away. God’s love is not so much a thing, but action. One theologian put it this way—God’s love is a verb, not a noun. Love is the woman who cleans up after her ailing husband has soiled the bed. Love is the high school student who makes a sincere effort to befriend a weird classmate. Love is the man who makes the time each day to visit his mother in a nursing home. Love is the college student who puts off studying for a test to listen to a roommate whose parents are getting a divorce.

God’s love moves us to be loving, not just when we look at each other at our wedding, but when we get out of bed on a cold winter’s morning after a sleepless night, when the hair gets gray and the toned muscles turn to fat, when we annoy each other, when our patience is worn thin, and when we wonder, “How long can I stand this?”

So why did we do Holy Communion before the sermon? In Holy Communion we not only get to hear God say, “I love you,” we get to experience it. God’s love is not something for us to understand or figure out. It is for us to experience and share.

“Love always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres.” Love—real love—God’s love—God in action—never fails!