

Sermon: Love, Actually
Text: I Corinthians 13:1-13
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Context: WWPC
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Love is patient; love is kind . . .

I Corinthians 13:4a

Nowadays it's nearly impossible to hear the passage I just read without picturing two young love birds, standing in front of a minister, or perhaps a justice of the peace, ready to take the vows that will bind them together as a married couple.

But that's only a relatively recent phenomenon. We've said this before but it's worth repeating that Paul did not intend for these words to be read at weddings. As relevant as his famous commentary on the nature of love may be to married life, it was not meant to offer guidance to couples setting out together on the adventure that is marriage.

Paul addressed these words to a community that was, on the one hand, wildly diverse, and on the other, in deep and profound conflict.

Corinth is a port city, but it also happens to be situated right at the head of an overland shortcut to Athens. Because of its unique location, it was an intensely cosmopolitan city.

Its population consisted of a loud, swirling mix of Greek intellectuals; traders and merchants from all over the Mediterranean world, and beyond; members of the Jewish diaspora; and devotees of the various Greco-Roman and pagan religions of the day, just to name the a few of the most prominent subcultures that, together, comprised the population of lively city.

Not surprisingly, the members of the church community in Corinth reflected the diversity of the city's general population.

Given the deep differences between these various constituent groups, it is also not surprising that the members of the Corinthian church fought over just about everything: food, money, sex, inclusivity, and identity.

To help us better understand the tensions running through the Corinthian church, let me try to translate its diversity into more contemporary terms.

Let's say you take fifty people who love the Patriots, fifty people who don't, and fifty people who think American football is dull and boring and maybe even a little barbaric compared to the sport the rest of the world knows as football.

And you plunk them down together with fifty people who voted for the president, fifty people who voted for his opponent and fifty people who sat out the election because they couldn't bring themselves to vote for either candidate.

And then add fifty people who love to eat beef, and fifty people who think cows are literally sacred and who have never even touched meat of any kind, and fifty gluten-free vegans for whom eating a dollop of pimento cheese on a Wheat Thin is an offense against everything they believe -- mix all those component parts together, and voilà, you've basically got the Corinthian church.

It's to that group that Paul says this:

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.

More than a few commentators have observed that this is a highly idealized list of love's essential qualities.

I sometimes wonder if at least a few of the critics who make this case perhaps sat down to comment on this passage fresh from a spat with their spouse, rooted in the fact they forgot, again, to pick up the dry cleaning on their way home.

I think this list is less idealized and more aspirational. It's supposed to be hard to practice a love that looks like this.

Which is why I think it's helpful to remember that a love that is patient and kind; a love that is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude, that does not insist on its own way; that is not irritable or resentful; that does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth; that bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things; a love like this isn't where we start.

A love like this starts with something much simpler and much more basic. It starts, I believe, with acceptance.

At least it did for Andrew Solomon, and I am convinced it does for all of us.

Today, Mr. Solomon is one of the foremost authorities in the country, perhaps in the world, on how acceptance gives rise to love. His book *Far From the Tree: Parents, Children and the Search for Identity*, examines how it is that parents come to love children who might seem difficult to love.

It's a story Andrew Solomon knows from the inside.

When he was just six years old Andrew's mother took him and his brother out to buy to some new shoes. After his mom paid for a pair of new Keds for each of her sons, the clerk offered to give the boys free balloons and invited them to pick one out for themselves. Andrew's brother picked out a red balloon. Andrew picked out a pink one

His mother promptly intervened, pointing out to little Andrew that she thought that, deep down, he would prefer a blue one to a pink one. In the end, she convinced her son that blue, not pink was his favorite color. And so that day Andrew gave up part of who he was to be someone he wasn't.

You can't blame his mother. In 1966 -- well within most of our lifetimes and just three years before Mrs. Solomon took her boys shopping for shoes -- an article in Time magazine declared the following:

"Even in purely non-religious terms, homosexuality represents a misuse of the sexual faculty. It is a pathetic little second-rate substitute for reality -- a pitiable flight from life. As such, it deserves no compassion, it deserves no treatment as minority martyrdom, and it deserves not to be deemed anything but a pernicious sickness."

That's not a conservative Christian publication. That's Time magazine.

With that as the backdrop to his childhood, it's not surprising that it took Andrew many years to learn to accept himself, and still more years to realize that is was but the first step on the journey toward learning to love himself.

But he did the work, and he pushed back on the prevailing norms of the day, and Andrew is now happily married to his husband, and he has children and he is living the life he was born to live, pink balloons and all.

His experience of learning to love and accept himself gave rise to an ongoing interest in the question of how parents who are more accepting than his mother was, come to love and accept even the most difficult children, children that are far outside the normal boundaries and place great demands on their parents: deaf kids, autistic kids, kids with Downs Syndrome, trans kids who not only want to pick the wrong color balloon but are convinced they were born the wrong gender.

In the course of his research he met a young man named Clinton Brown. When Clinton was born, he was diagnosed with diastrophic dwarfism.

This diagnosis didn't just mean that Clinton would grow up to be what we now call a short person. This was an acutely disabling form of dwarfism. Doctors told Clinton's parents that their son would never walk, he would never talk, he would have no intellectual capacity, and he would probably not even recognize them. And it was suggested to them that they leave him at the hospital so that he could die there quietly.

To which his mother said, simply: No. No, we're not going to do that. And she took Clinton home.

And that's when the story got really interesting. Clinton's parents were people of limited educational achievement and modest financial means.

And yet, as Andrew tells it, his mother found the best doctor in the country for dealing with diastrophic dwarfism, and she got Clinton enrolled with him.

Over the course of his lifetime, Clinton had more than two dozen major surgical procedures. These were hard and expensive but, today, as a result of them, Clinton can walk.

Clinton's parents found tutors for him and he used all the time he spent in the hospital recovering from these surgeries to learn and to study. He reached such an advanced level that he enrolled in and eventually graduated from college, the first member of his family to do so.

In talking to his mother about all of this, Andrew asked her what she had done specifically to help him emerge as a charming, accomplished and wonderful person.

She replied: "What did I do? I loved him, that's all. Clinton just always had that light in him. And his father and I were lucky enough to be the first to see it there."

Imagine how wonderful it would be if that was the motto of the church: the place that sees the light in people, in all their breathtaking diversity. The place that accepts people exactly the way they are, so that it can then love them into the people they were born to be.

The place that sees not what people can't do but what they can do. Not their shortcomings but their potential.

Because here's the truth, there's a little bit of Clinton in everyone. I'm fairly certain that inside each one of us there's a part of ourselves that feels small, perhaps. Or a part that feels unloveable. A part that we hope no one will ever see, because we fear that if they did see it, they wouldn't love us.

It's that part, especially, that is welcome here today, and every week. Because loving that part is what makes us better. It's what makes us whole. It's what makes us the church, the Body of Christ on earth.

Amen