

Thoughts on Valentines' Day – Marriage and Family  
1 Corinthians 13

It is said that if a man opens the car door for his wife, one of two things is true; either the marriage is new or the car is.

Is there just a glimmer of truth here? Isn't it sort of human nature to take each other for granted? As time goes on, meals are cooked and no thank-you given, lawns are mowed, no appreciation expressed, paychecks brought home and the discussion isn't thanks for working so hard to provide, but rather, it isn't quite enough.

I'm concerned about the high divorce rate in our nation, but I'm also concerned about the high rate of marriages

that are endured, rather than celebrated. I'm not sure there are statistics kept about these, but so many couples simply stay together because of habit or inertia, and any hopes of marriage being exciting and fulfilling and joyous, are cast aside, and couples settle into a sort of truce, sort of like the North Koreans and the South Koreans. As long as nothing flares up, then it's OK.

There's a needlepoint or plaque or kitchen hanging, whatever you want to call it that you can purchase at places like Cracker Barrel, which really annoys me. It says, "Lovin' don't last. Cookin' do." Or if we want to add another stereotypical role "Lovin' don't last, lawn-mowin' do." What a paltry notion of marriage! That if you're together long enough the joy, the intimacy, the affection

bound up in marriage flies away, and all that remains are functional roles: cooking, cleaning, lawnmowing, kitty litter cleaning.

But we don't need to settle for that. In our marriages, in our families, in our friendships.

Maybe this year we will use Valentines Day as an opportunity to place love again in its proper place. At the center of who we are as human beings, who we are as people of faith, who we are as those created in the image of God.

Valentines Day is an opportunity to risk. To risk reconciliation, or renewal, or making better, those ties of love which bind us together.

How does a mother really tell a child how precious he or she is? How can she explain why it is she worries so when a daughter goes out on a date or goes off to college? How can she explain why she would rather be hurt ten times than her child be hurt once? How do you say that without sounding mushy or something. And how can the child possibly even begin to understand. . . until she herself becomes a mother.

How can a husband really tell his wife that when everything else in his day has gone wrong, all that keeps him going is knowing that he will go home and she will be there?

How does a child, especially a teenaged critter actually tell Mom and Dad that although they are so incredibly lame and a real embarrassment to be around, that deep down, their life would be somehow empty and scary if Mom and Dad were not around?

It's tough to do. It's almost impossible to do. But Valentine's Day is our opportunity. Because love is really at the center of who we are. We need to express it, don't we?

And as we seek to live out our relationships in a Christ-like way, perhaps the best we can say is that the other one in a relationship, be it friendship or family or neighbor, the other one has just as much rights as we do. If we insist on

our own way, pretty soon the relationship becomes bruised.

And especially the marriage relationship. Now, I know the verse, wives, submit to your husbands, (Eph5:22) but even here that's not all there is to it. Let me explain.

I am concerned that some, just some, so called Christian men take the verses about wives submitting to husbands and use them to claim special selfish power for themselves in the marriage. They do so by forgetting the demand placed upon men by Scripture: which is for men to submit to Christ, to be Christ-like with their wives. And what might submission to Christ look like?

When Colossians 3:19 says, husbands, love your wives, we note that the word for "love" in Greek is not the word we usually associate with love in marriage: affection, passion or such, but rather, the word is agape, which means unconditional, life-giving love. Love that exalts another. Same in Ephesians 5:25, just three verses after wives are told to submit, husbands are commanded: "Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church."

This is indeed radical stuff. Unconditional love offers stature and freedom and respect to the other as a cherished and worthwhile individual. In a society which said, women, you are nothing, the Bible is teaching, husbands, treat your wives as if they were everything.

Or put it this way: a man who says, I am the head of the household might find a marriage that works for him, but only at the expense of his wife. And to the extent that “wives be submissive,” leads to abuse, or deprives wives of their God-given dreams and thoughts and opinions and wisdom, that is nothing but blasphemy and sin.

But a man who says, I’m not the head of the household, Christ is, and treats his wife with honor and respect, and with a sense of equality arising out of Christ’s love for all, then that marriage has a chance of being what God intended it to be: joyous and fulfilling for both husband and wife, and a blessing not just to their family, but to the world. Godly marriage exalts not just one partner, but both.

And folks, if we ever read the Scripture to demand that a wife stay with a husband even when there is abuse, then we have completely misread what God intends. Christ's love for us is unconditional, but the marriage covenant is based upon both partners keeping vows.

Even Jesus allows for divorce in the case of adultery, but we further need to understand in Scripture, adultery means not just what we think it does, but also more. It is any act that breaks the vows of marriage, that destroys the covenant of committed love. And so abuse, verbal or physical, and addiction, whether it be to pornography or alcohol or drugs are also a breaking of vows.

Marriage is intended by God to be a joyous partnership, not a prison sentence or a death sentence.

Well, speaking of love, this 13<sup>th</sup> Chapter of First Corinthians is often known as the love chapter. The word for love again here is agape, that unconditional love Christ has for us, and which we seek to reflect in our daily lives. So, it doesn't talk specifically about marriage and family relationships, but there are principles here worth hearing again in the context of Valentines' Day.

What's the context? The folks in Corinth are arguing about what constitutes authentic Christian living, authentic Christian faith. And in the 12<sup>th</sup> Chapter, Paul has spoken to the issue that speaking in tongues is the primary mark of

faith. Paul acknowledges that, indeed, speaking in tongues is a valid, though not necessary, expression of faith. But then he says this: let me show you a more excellent way.

A more authentic way, if you will, of what it means to be in relationship with Christ. And this leads to this 13<sup>th</sup> Chapter. And so, Paul says, if I speak in tongues (of men and angels, unknown tongues), but don't have love, I'm nothing more than a blaring car alarm that can't be turned off. I'm paraphrasing here.

If I can predict the future or if I can unravel all mysteries of the present, but in such a way that love is not exalted and

made front and center, I'm, well, nothing, I add nothing to the Kingdom.

And if I sacrifice it all, even my very body, but love isn't at the center, I gain nothing. The Kingdom of Christ comes no nearer.

So, then, we look again at the foundation of what it means to be of Christ: there is faith, hope, and love. Faith is important, for it's the driving force of our lives. Because we believe Jesus is risen from the dead, because we believe in him, we live in a different way.

And hope. Hope gives us the determination to go on. Hope reminds us not just that at the end of our journey a

blessed eternity awaits, but hope also reminds us that as we live in Christ we make a difference, we begin to change the world, we begin to bend this wayward world in a Christlike direction.

But then Paul places love at the center. This concept of love, unconditional love, which is the guide for our life and conduct, it's nebulous, it can't really ever be perfectly described. But Paul takes a stab at it. Not a comprehensive list, but some examples of exactly what sort of love this love in which we live actually is.

And if it resonates with how we conduct a marriage or a friendship or a family or relations with our neighbors, so much the better.

Love is patient. Even with teenagers. And kind, even with those who cut us off in traffic. Love does not envy, even if your friend has an IPOD and you have to listen to some ancient technology from 2004.

Love doesn't boast. Isn't rude. Keeps no record of wrongs. Even if he did forget your anniversary twelve years ago.

Love leads us to protect, to trust. Love perseveres, in other words, doesn't let us run away during dark times.

And Paul then writes, I don't know everything. Maybe I don't know very much. It's like looking for something and

seeing only a dark shadow. But I know this much: without love, nothing, not even Christ, means very much.

So, how about it? What about your marriage? What about your relationship with your kids or your parents? What about your relationship with other church folk or neighbors?

What changes, for the sake of love, might you be willing to make to make your relationships better? Who or what might you forgive in order that love be exalted again, that relationships be healed? What changes to make a good marriage even better?

Perhaps Valentine's Day is an opportunity for us to continue, or to begin again that journey that centers on faith, hope and love, and exalts love as the greatest of these. Amen.