

CHOOSING THE MOST EXCELLENT WAY

Love.

Poets do their best to describe it.

Psychiatrists and psychologists try to analyze it.

Scientists attempt to understand the biological and physiological reasons for it.

Human beings spend a lot of time, energy and money striving to find it in relationships.

But when all is said and done, we don't really know a whole lot about love.

When it comes right down to it, love is a mystery. It's an enigma.

Love is something we look for but is difficult to find. Something we yearn for but often seems unattainable. Something that's very important to us, but we don't even really know how to define it.

If I were to ask you, "What is love?" how would you answer?

When Jesus commanded his followers to "love one another," what did he mean?

And if we don't know what Jesus meant, how can we possibly obey?

Do you know what love is? Does anybody really know what love is?

In his first letter to the Corinthian church, the Apostle Paul took a crack at trying to shed light on the meaning of love.

Most of us are very familiar with his words. I've read them many times at weddings I've officiated at, even though that's not what they were intended for when they were first written. It was written for church communities like ours.

According to Paul, with love you have everything. Without love, you have nothing. Love is patient and kind. It's not arrogant or boastful. It keeps no record of wrongdoings. And so on.

That's all well and good, Paul. Thanks for the lovely words telling us about the signs or evidence of love's existence. But is there more to love than what you just described?

This morning, I want to speak about love. And I would begin by holding up the institution of marriage, which I think everyone can agree is intended to be grounded in love.

Like the old children's rhyme says, "First comes love; then comes marriage."

In our culture and society, if two people don't love each other, then they certainly shouldn't get married.

I've counseled some young couples who wanted me to officiate at their wedding, and as they shared some of the history of their relationship, a red flag was raised in my mind that would concern me.

I could sense a significant difference of opinion about something very important—such as when to have or how to raise their children, or the way they intended to handle their finances—that I believed could potentially threaten the health and viability of their marriage.

In short, I could see possible trouble on the horizon.

But when I told them about my concern and how I saw the potential for serious conflict, the couple would poo-poo the notion with words to the effect, "Oh, but we love each other so much, and that's what matters. Our love can overcome any differences or challenges we have."

Do you believe that's true?

Do you believe, to quote from a song by the musical prophet John Lennon, that "all you need is love," and "love is all you need"?

At first glance, that appears to be what the Apostle Paul was saying in his beautiful hymn to love in 1 Corinthians 13.

Only love endures. Love overcomes all things. Faith, hope and love are all wonderful virtues, but "the greatest of these is love."

But I think we need to be careful in our assumptions about what Paul meant by those words.

We need to be cautious so as to not impose our own personal notions and understanding about love—especially romantic love—on the Apostle's words.

I guess that just about everyone associates Valentine's Day—a day that was almost certainly dreamed up by florists and greeting card companies—with romantic love.

But anyone who has ever been "in love" in a romantic way knows how temporary and fleeting the feelings of romantic love are, once those feelings come face-to-face with human nature, the imperfections of the individual we love, and the realities of life.

Romantic love can be like a hot flash that comes over us, burns us up and then burns itself out over time. And after the heat of romantic love dissipates, what's left to us is . . . a choice.

As romantic love's fever subsides and we see our beloved in a new and different light—the clear light of reality and truthfulness and authenticity—the only thing we can do then is choose whether or not to love him or her.

Some people resist the idea that love is a choice.

They would rather believe that love is like an addictive drug, a powerful, seductive emotion that overcomes us, controls us, and makes us do things we otherwise wouldn't do and behave in ways we otherwise wouldn't behave.

We've all heard such feelings in love songs: I would climb the highest mountain, swim the deepest ocean, or cross the widest river for the one I loved. I would even die for my beloved.

But why would we do such drastic things? Because we're swept up by romantic feelings and we simply can't help ourselves? Because we're driven to do them by a force that's beyond our control?

Or would we do them because we choose to?

Many people confuse Christian love—the love Jesus commanded us to have for our neighbor—with romantic love. But Christian love has little or nothing to do with climbing the highest mountain or swimming across the deepest ocean. and Christian love isn't about having warm, fuzzy or passionate feelings for another person.

Rather, Christian love has everything to do with seeing Christ in all people, even the bad ones, and making a conscious choice to love them, even if we have lukewarm or negative feelings or no feelings at all for them.

That's why we get so confused when we hear Jesus say crazy, irrational stuff like, "Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you;" or when our Lord tells a parable in which this no good, despicable Samaritan goes above and beyond the call of duty and helps a beaten up, seriously hurt total stranger and despised religious enemy, and then tells us to "Go and do likewise."

That's impossible! I don't know this person. I don't have the slightest feeling of affection for this person. I despise this person.

And yet Jesus tells us to go and love them anyway?

How can we possibly do that?

The only possible way we can love them is to choose to love them.

This is what Paul was telling the Corinthians to do.

He was imploring the fighting, feuding Christians in the church in Corinth to choose to love each other, in spite of their negative feelings and differences of opinion.

In the verse that comes immediately before 1 Corinthians 13, Paul wrote, “Now, eagerly desire the greater gifts. And I will show you the most excellent way.”

That really should be the first verse of chapter 13, because it sets up the whole rest of Paul’s hymn about love.

Notice what Paul was saying.

“Eagerly desire” to love. “I will show you the most excellent way” of love.

Paul wasn’t talking about feelings. You can’t desire yourself to feel love for someone else.

You can’t be shown how to feel love for your neighbor.

No, Paul was urging the Corinthians to make a choice, to choose to love one another in spite of their negative feelings, their conflicts with, and even their dislike for them.

Now the question becomes, “how?” How can we choose to love one another?

How can we make the choice to love our neighbor, if our inner feelings and strong inclination is to not love them?

That’s where God comes in.

Ah yes, God. God is the secret ingredient that makes it possible to choose to love our neighbor as Jesus commanded.

If you read 1 Corinthians 13 carefully, you’ll notice that Paul’s urgent appeal for the Corinthians to “desire the greater gifts” and follow “the most excellent way” of love was made in the context of the Corinthians’ commitment to Christ.

You see, Christian love, the kind of love that’s commanded of us, is a sign of our relationship to Christ. We love, committedly, faithfully, even if grudgingly, because God in Christ loved us first.

God’s love for us is what makes it possible for us to love our neighbor and one another.

You know, romantic love can be wonderful.

It’s intoxicating; it’s exciting; it’s exhilarating; it makes us feel young and alive. It’s a genuine gift from God, and I hope everyone here has had at least one experience in their life of being in true, romantic love with another person.

But romantic love tends to be short-lived, fickle and changeable. What we need is something that makes us able to love people even when they’re difficult to love, and even when we’re difficult to love!

We need something that enables us to choose to love even when we don't feel like it.

We need God, who showed us the "most excellent way" of love through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, God's only Son.

As I begin to wind down my message this morning, let me say this.

I know people who believe the Christian faith can be summed up in the statement, "God is love." But I don't think that's quite right. Because God isn't just love—at least not the way we often use that slippery word.

No, I believe that, more than just being love, God is also commitment and faithfulness to us, even when we're not so committed and faithful to God.

Which is why the Hebrew Scriptures frequently speak, not just about the love of God, but the steadfast love of God.

"Steadfast" as in, no matter what we do or how badly we screw things up; no matter how little we do for God and how apathetic we might be towards Him, God's love for us is unwavering, unfaltering, persistent, resolute, dedicated, unswerving and firm.

Think about it this way.

Have you ever considered that maybe God doesn't feel all "warm and fuzzy" about you, because sometimes you're not so loveable.

Maybe God gets annoyed about our poor attitudes, and angry with us because of the way we speak about and treat others.

But thankfully, even if that's the case, God still loves us with a steadfast, unending love. Because God chooses to love us, in spite of ourselves.

And God expects that from us in our relationships and encounters with other human beings.

Christian love isn't so much a feeling, but an enduring, determined choice to treat one another and our neighbors with kindness, compassion, dignity and respect, no matter what we feel for them, and even if we have no feelings at all.

We choose to love them and treat them that way because God has chosen to love us and treat us that way.

We all know it's impossible for imperfect, mortal human beings like us to stay faithful and committed to the Christian ideal of loving others in any and all circumstances. Which is why we greatly need God's help to do it.

Love, you see, is a gift of God, not a human achievement. That's why we need to ask for God's blessing upon all our loving relationships—the easy ones and the challenging ones.

And we need to ask God to give us the grace to be able to love one another the way God loves each of us in Christ—completely, committedly, and in all circumstances.

Not because we want to do it or feel like doing it, but because we choose to do it and ask God to help us to do it.

With respect to the John Lennon, whose words and music I have long admired, love isn't all we need.

We need something to go along with it.

We need God to give us the humility to understand how difficult it sometimes is for others to love us, and the strength and will to choose to love others, no matter how difficult it may be to do so.

So, this morning God is extending an invitation to us.

God invites us to eagerly desire the greater gifts and be shown the most excellent way.

It's the way of patience and kindness.

This most excellent way doesn't boast and isn't proud.

It doesn't dishonor others; it's not self-seeking; it's not easily angered, and it keeps no record of wrongs.

This most excellent way God would show us doesn't delight in evil, but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, and always perseveres.

And this most excellent way never fails.

In the end, when all is said and done and God closes the curtain on our lives, the Apostle Paul said only three things will remain: faith, hope and love.

And the greatest of these is love.

May we choose the most excellent way. Amen.