

I want you to raise your hand if you had heard this scripture before.

Okay, now I want you to keep your hand raised if you had heard this scripture before at a wedding.

Many of us associate this beautiful passage with weddings, and at first glance, it makes sense.

The poetic words about love seem to fit perfectly in a service that is a celebration of love.

This passage is well-known, and well-loved.

I have seen it printed on everything from posters to coffee cups.

But the Theologian Frederick Buchener said, *“Words as familiar as these are like coins worn smooth with long handling.*

*After a while it is hard to tell where they came from or what they are worth.”*

Believe it or not, this scripture was not originally written for a marriage ceremony.

I think many of us have forgotten, or never knew, where these words came from.

We’re going to spend some time learning about the origins of this text, and who knows, at the end you might think it’s better off read at a marriage counseling session rather than at a wedding.

But my hope is that through learning more about these beautiful words, we will give them back their worth, as Buechner says, or perhaps, give them even more worth than they have now.

You see, this scripture comes from the book of Corinthians.

It's actually a letter, written by the apostle Paul.

It was intended for the people living in the city of Corinth, hence the name of the biblical book, Corinthians.

Paul wrote this letter to the new Christians who had recently adopted this faith and were trying to figure out how to live in community together.

Needless to say, things were not going well.

They were arguing and fighting and they could not get along.

They were obsessed with their statuses.

Who was richer?

Who had more gifts of the spirit?

Who could get divorced?

Who could speak in worship?

There were lawsuits and idolatry and partisanship!

They were dividing themselves behind rival leaders.

Yes, the leaders, who you might think would have been working to resolve the situation, well, they weren't.

They were adding to the chaos by competing for status and influence.

The main reason why this new Christian community fought so much is because it was so diverse!

There were people from an exclusively pagan background, there were half-Jewish pagans, that is, people who converted to Judaism at some point in life and then converted to Christianity.

And then there were Jews from birth.

Corinth was a big city, and just like in the United States today, the wealth was very divided.

The top 10 percent of the people monopolized 40 percent of the resources.

The bottom echelon of society lived in constant hunger, with people literally looking for food and eating whatever they could find.

So, you've got religious diversity, economic diversity, and of course, there were complicated gender dynamics surrounding sexual activity.

There were single people, betrothed people, there were happily married people, unhappily married people, people married to another Christian, and people married to a pagan.

The things which might seem personal and private to us today, well, they spilled over into community life.

These diverse Corinthian converts brought into their Christian community all the hostility, suspicion, and misunderstanding that arose from their differences in religion, class, sexuality and gender.

It's no wonder that they were fighting.

They didn't trust each other outside the church, there was no reason for them to trust each other inside the church.

I would consider Paul a saint for putting up with this motley crew, because not only did many of them dislike each other, they disliked him too!

Paul was brilliant, but he couldn't speak well, and the Greco-Roman snobs, they wanted a leader who was a good orator.

And, he was dirty, bedraggled, and unpaid.

He wasn't much to look at, and this was a problem for the Corinthian leaders who cared about appearance and status, because he was embarrassing.

They would have preferred to follow someone impressive like Apollos!

They had no intention of following Paul's example and acting like servant leaders.

They were not interested in living alongside other humble converts and caring for those in their community who were weak and poor.

Again, their values were that of appearance and wealth outside the church, and their values didn't change once they got inside the church.

You can see why there were sharp divisions and why they were having such a tough time getting along.

This is why Paul writes this passionate letter to them about love.

He is doing everything he can to implore to them, that at the end of the day, what matters is love.

It doesn't matter how much money you have or what level of education you have or what you look like or what spiritual gifts you have, if you do not love.

It doesn't matter how you speak or if you have prophetic powers or how much faith you have, it doesn't matter if you give away all your possessions and even hand over your very own body, if you do not have love.

Love is the basis of everything.

Now, this isn't romantic, Valentine's, eros love.

This is agape.

This is sacrificial love, the kind that Jesus showed us by giving up his life on the cross.

Paul isn't calling members of Christ's Body to feel passionately about each other or even to like each other.

He is calling us to act in a self-sacrificing way toward people who are not nice to us and whom we may not like one bit.

This kind of love is not passive, it's active.

In fact, a more accurate translation might be instead of 'love is patient,' it would be 'love shows patience,'

and instead of 'love is kind,' it would be 'love acts with kindness.'

Love is hard work, love is making sacrifices.

Love is biting your tongue and turning the other cheek and making a compromise for the good of the whole, because you know that we are better together than we are apart.

Love looks for ways to express itself for the good of others.

True love is measured by its capacity for tension and disagreement without division.

Love abides, it hangs in there, it tries to understand.

And Paul is desperately trying to convey to this diverse group of people the importance of the ethic of love, because their community is at stake.

If they don't figure out how to love one another, they will fall apart.

Now, today is our Annual Meeting Sunday, so I thought it would be appropriate to think about this scripture in our context.

In order to help us do that, I re-wrote this passage to fit our purposes.

If Paul was writing us a letter for our meeting today, it might go something like this:

If I speak at length at annual meeting, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal.

And if I am really smart, and I am able to help out with all the church's problems, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing.

If I sell everything I have and give all the money to the church to help defeat the deficit, but do not have love, I gain nothing.

Love is patient when others are speaking at annual meeting, love is kind when words are exchanged in committee meetings; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant about the role it has in the life of the church.

Love is not rude, it assumes that others have the church's best intentions at heart.

Love does not insist that the church always make decisions that it wants, love understands compromise.

Love is not irritable or resentful because it takes deep breaths before speaking.

It bears all things, even deficits, believes all things, like the Spirit at work in our midst, hopes all things, like the strength of our community, endures all things, like differences of opinion at annual meeting and committee meetings, love never ends.

We exist because we believe that our community which lives according to a different reality, is still desperately needed in our world.

We are a Christian congregation where people of diverse backgrounds, ages, abilities and incomes can come together, in the spirit of God, and serve each other and the world, all in the name of love.

Let us remember that all that we do: the nominating process, the budget, the stewardship campaign, the fundraisers, the church structure and all the committees, the staff, the building, all of it, is for the sake of love.

For if we have love, we have everything. Amen.