

GREATEST OF ALL
1 Corinthians 13: 1-3
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When was the last time you heard this Scripture read? It might be one of the most well-known passages; up there with the 10 Commandments, Lord's Prayer and Beatitudes. It's often used at funerals and memorial services and of course... weddings.

Valentine's Day was Friday. *My favorite valentine card remains the one I found many years ago. On the cover were the words, "I love you terribly". On the inside it said, "But I'll improve with practice."* Wouldn't we all?

There's a story about a couple who had been married for forty years. They celebrated their anniversary by having a quiet dinner and evening alone. Near the close, she turned to him, raised her glass and said simply, "In spite of it all." In spite of it all, sometimes in spite of ourselves, by God's grace we are enabled to love one another.

Our marriage ritual hints at this understanding. We don't ask the couple: *"Do you love her? Do you love him?"* Instead, what the Church asks is *"Will you love her? Will you love him?"* We remind the couple love is a choice to make. You don't know what life holds. You don't know what will be asked of you. You don't know what the future will bring you or take from you. *Will you love each other? When it is easy and when it is hard. When things are going well and when there are worse than you ever expected; will you love each other?* Love is always a matter of choice. It is not how we feel. Love is how we act.

Often, how we act in spite of our emotions. When Paul describes love he's talking about something that is strong, determined and tough. It's not that sloppy, sentimental, sappy, syrupy stuff the world often calls love. Love here is not a feeling. It's a way of life.

It's a behavior. Love is something you do. Love is a decision. A disposition, if you will. A temperament.

Paul did not have a wedding in mind when he penned the letter to the Corinthians. He was responding to a letter from that fledgling church he'd established --a letter that raised questions about the foundations of Christian life and faith. In Paul's absence from Corinth, debate and confusion had developed about the importance of various spiritual gifts manifested among the believers.

Today's passage falls between two chapters about the nature and kinds of spiritual gifts and lessons on "being the body". Paul says each of us is given different gifts—and God expects us to use those gifts for the common good.

There is one gift all of us are called to practice. **That is the gift of love.** It *surpasses* the gifts Paul has just named; speaking in tongues, prophecy, knowledge, giving, faith...without love these count for nothing. It's above and beyond. It makes all the others possible.

Corinth was a divided Church. One might say they originated the Church fight. The Corinthians were always battling about something. When they weren't actually openly fighting, they were bickering. There was always something over which they didn't agree.

Paul was concerned for the community there. He was troubled by how they treated one another. He was worried by their lack of care for one another. He was particularly concerned for the witness they were making. They were Christians. They were living examples of what life in Christ was like. Paul was concerned that how they behaved would send the wrong message. He gave them a description of what he called, "*the more excellent way*".

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.

In *To Love as God Loves*, Roberta Bondi recounts a well-known story from the Desert Fathers—those Abbas and Ammas of the early Church-- about a monk who, frustrated by his struggles with anger, decides to isolate himself in the desert. His reasoning is that if he removes himself from people and external triggers, he will no longer experience anger.

However, while in solitude, he spills a jug of water. Frustrated, he refills it, only to spill it again. This happens multiple times, and he finally realizes that his anger is not caused by other people—it is within himself. The Desert Fathers' wisdom was that true spiritual growth comes not from avoiding challenges but from confronting and transforming one's inner struggles.

Love, patience, and humility are cultivated through relationships and everyday struggles, not by escaping them.

Left to our own inclinations and intentions we falter and fail all too often. It's hard to stay constant. It's hard to cope with our own limitations, let alone those of others. Loving unconditionally, sacrificially and intentionally is a difficult task.

This “list” is pretty comprehensive. At first—it seems IMPOSSIBLE. To love like this, all the time, all the time, always and in all ways and circumstances and conditions—no one on Earth could do that. Well, no one on Earth can.

Paul's model for love is Jesus. His emphasis here is not on the one loved but the one doing the loving. It is not how we are loved; it's how we love. His description of love is not given so we might measure how others love us. It is given so we might measure ourselves.

Jesus model for love is God. God is love and we ought to love others. We want to be loving persons. To love unconditionally, sacrificially, and intentionally with an unswerving commitment to the good of others as well as ourselves is a difficult task.

That's why Bishop Will Willimon says it takes three to love. It takes one to give love and one to receive love. **It also takes God.** God makes our loving possible. God gives us the grace that's necessary to go beyond ourselves, especially in those times when we don't feel like it and the other is being difficult. Especially when the ones we're called to love or trying to love are at their most unlovable. God is love and we ought to love others. That's the goal.

Christian love is *agape* love; it is a love that "*seeks not its own*". Its love that continually seeks what is good for another. This kind of love does not come easily or naturally. It takes a life time to perfect. It takes plenty of practice. It takes every ounce of maturity that we have. Above all it takes the power of God at work in our lives enabling us to love and to go on loving, especially in those times when we don't feel like it and when the ones we are called to love are at their most unlovable.

I've shared this illustration before—but it's a good one, and bears repeating.

Little Chad was shy and quiet. One day he came home and told his mother he wanted to make a Valentine for everyone in his class. Her heart sank. "I wish he wouldn't do that," she thought. She watched the children when they walked home from school. Chad was always behind them. They laughed and hung on to one another. They talked to each other. Chad was never included.

Nevertheless, she agreed. She bought paper, glue and crayons. For three weeks, every night she and Chad worked to make thirty-five valentines. Valentine's Day came. Chad was beside himself with excitement. He carefully stacked them up, put them in a bag and bolted out the door. His mom decided she'd

have warm cookies and cold milk ready when he came home. She knew he'd be disappointed. It hurt her to think he wouldn't get many valentines—maybe none at all.

Afternoon came. She heard the children outside. She looked out the window. Sure enough they were laughing and having the best time. As always, Chad was in the rear. She saw that he walked a little faster than usual. She fully expected him to burst into tears the moment he arrived. His arms were empty she noticed. She choked back her tears.

"Mommy has some warm cookies and milk for you," she said. He hardly heard her words. He just marched by. His face was glowing. All he said was:

"Not a one... not a one. I didn't forget a one, not a single one!"¹

Jesus calls us to love; to love God and to love one another. God's grace makes it possible for us to do it. Love itself is a gift. It comes from God. God enables us to love. **God is love.** That is where our Christian life begins. That is also where it ends. *Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never ends.* That is not a matter of sentiment but of faith. Love is not destroyed, not even by death. God is love. Love remains.

The love we give to one another is the love we finally keep.

¹ A 3rd Serving of Chicken Soup for the Soul, edited by Jack Canfield & Mark Victor Hansen, pp. 71-2