

## I

This time of year is often known as “wedding season.” I would venture a guess that I’ve been to more weddings than anybody else you know. As a pastor, one of the great joys of my work is that I get to stand with couples as they make their solemn marriage vows to one another, and over the years, I’ve led all kinds of weddings. I’ve led weddings with hundreds of guests and dozens of attendants. I’ve led weddings on a beach, weddings on a mountaintop, weddings in a barn, weddings in five star hotels, and just a few weeks ago, I had the honor privilege of leading a wedding service in an Oconee County backyard with a grand total of eight guests, all appropriately socially distanced, of course.

But long before I became a pastor and began leading wedding services, I worked school breaks as a banquet server in a country club. It wasn’t uncommon for us to work two and sometimes even three wedding receptions on the same weekend. So I’ve personally witnessed more exhibitions of the Chicken Dance, the Hokey Pokey, and the Electric Slide than I care to remember.

## II

Most of us generally enjoy weddings, don’t we? Weddings are usually happy occasions as families and friends come together to surround a couple as they start a new life together, to mark the occasion when a new family is formed. It’s a time when we try to put

our best selves forward, when we smile for the camera, a time when we celebrate love.

In all the wedding services I’ve ever led, by far, the most commonly requested passage from Scripture at the wedding service is the one that is before us today - the 13th chapter of 1 Corinthians. And rightly so, for these words about the enduring nature of love are imminently appropriate as two people make their solemn marriage vows to one another.

## III

But I don’t think the man who originally penned these words had a wedding in mind when he sat down to write them. He wasn’t writing to a young couple just starting out on the road of life – he was writing to a church, to a group of Christians who were, at the risk of pushing the metaphor, teetering perilously close to the edge of divorce.

As we mentioned last week, First Corinthians is not a book at all, but a rather long letter, sent from a pastor to a group of Christians living in the city of Corinth about 20 years or so after the death and resurrection of Jesus. Corinth was a major seaport and center of trade, and as such, it was a city of incredible diversity. In fact, the Christians that made up the Corinthian church may have been the most diverse congregation of the first century.

And all of that urban living, all of that frequent contact with ships and traders from across the sea, all of that

diversity of backgrounds and upbringings and worldviews, all of that had a profound impact on the church in Corinth. On the one hand, it made for a rich tapestry of experience and worldviews. It made for a powerful witness - that all of these people from different backgrounds and worldviews - Jews and Greeks and slaves and free and old and young and poor and wealthy and male and female - all of these people could come together to worship the Lord Jesus Christ. But of course, all of that diversity also provided the fertile seedbed for conflict and controversy.

And in Corinth, the conflict and controversy centered around a number of questions - questions like, "What does it mean to be baptized, and under whose name?" Questions like, "What is the meaning of the Lord's Supper?" Questions like, "What is the use and value of spiritual gifts, especially the gift of tongues? And the list goes on and on.

And so Paul's letter to the Corinthians is the work of a wise pastor trying to address these questions and conflicts and controversies that had sprouted among the followers of Jesus who were living amid all that diversity who were trying to figure out how to do life together without tearing each other apart.

Paul isn't writing flowery prose to a young couple - he is writing a pastoral word to a church that was struggling to remember what it means to be followers of Jesus Christ in a broken, hurting, and often frightening world. The kind of

love Paul is describing here isn't the young love celebrated on a wedding day, or even the mature love celebrated on a milestone anniversary. Paul isn't writing about the kind of love that is sort of a mutual regard for a fellow human being or a sense of community solidarity. Paul is writing to the Corinthians, and to you and to me, about the self-emptying love that is found in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth.

And so listen now for a Word from God from 1 Corinthians 13:1-13.

*If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. If I give away all my possessions, and if I hand over my body so that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing.*

*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.*

*Love never ends. But as for prophecies, they will come to an end; as for tongues, they will cease; as for knowledge, it will come to an end. For we know only in part, and we prophesy only in part; but when the complete*

*comes, the partial will come to an end. When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child; when I became an adult, I put an end to childish ways. For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known. And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love.*

This is the Word of God for the people of God. Thanks be to God.

#### IV

I know that these are difficult days, my friend. There is so much uncertainty, so much grief, and so much anger in our world. Every single person with whom you share this planet has been impacted by this crisis in some way, and no one knows when or how the crisis will end.

In the words of the 20th century theologian Burt Bacharach, what the world needs now is love, sweet love. But what the world needs from you, what your friends need from you, what your family needs from you, is not the sugary love of weddings and Valentine's Day, or even the affection and regard as a fellow citizen. What the world needs from you right now, my friend, is the self-emptying love modeled for you in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth.

That's your number one job right now in this crisis – to love people. I'll never forget the day that I was sitting in

class, and our seminary professor was droning on about some finer point of theology, when she stopped mid-sentence, took off her glasses, leaned out over the podium, and she looked hard at all of us pastors-in-training. And she said, "You know, you have to love the people you serve. You don't have to like them. In fact, some of them you're never going to like, and they're never going to like you. But you have to love them. That's your job – to love people."

And that's your job in these strange days, my friend, as simple and as profound as that is – to love your people. You don't have to like them. Some of them you're never going to like, and they're never going to like you. Some of them think differently than you do. Some of them look differently than you do. Some of them have different opinions about politics and economics and epidemics than you do. Some of them are just flat wrong. You don't have to like them. But you have to love them. Because you can have all faith so as to move mountains. You can have prophetic powers and understand all mysteries and knowledge. You can give away all of your possessions and sacrifice your very body. But if you don't have the self-emptying love of Jesus Christ in your heart, then you're just making noise in an already noisy world. Your job, my friend, is to love people. Full stop.

#### V

These are strange days in which to be the church of Jesus Christ.

Congregations all across our nation, and indeed, around the world, are doing their best to balance their moral and ethical obligations to see to the safety and well-being of the people of God while also contemplating what a return to in-person gatherings might look like.

As for us, we who live out our discipleship in Christ in this place we call the First Presbyterian Church of Athens, I have been so impressed with the leadership of this congregation. Your elders and your church staff are working through scenarios and developing contingency plans to meet a challenge that this congregation hasn't faced in over 100 years.

And as they go about that faithful work, they aren't asking, "What's best for the bottom line of the church?" They aren't asking, "What would be the most convenient thing?" They aren't asking, "When can we return to normal?"

They're asking, "What is the next thing to do that most exhibits the love poured out for us on the cross of Jesus Christ?"

For we know that pandemics will come to an end. Economic downturns and furloughs won't last forever. Social distancing and quarantines will cease. But the love poured out in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth is patient and kind. The love of the Lamb of God is not envious or arrogant or boastful or rude. The love of God's only begotten Son bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, and

endures all things. And because we bear his name, so will we.

Thanks be to God. Amen.