



# CHRIST CHURCH CRANBROOK

***Love is for Grown Ups\_ - The Fourth Sunday after the Epiphany- 1\_30\_2022***

I speak to you today as a sinner to sinners, as the beloved of God to God's beloved, as one called to bear witness to those called to bear witness. Amen. Please be seated.

Earlier today at the 8:00 service, the person who was assigned to read the epistle from 1 Corinthians became uncharacteristically moved and he could barely get through the entire passage because it's such a powerful piece and such a powerful passage. And it's so elemental in our lives. So important for us to hear and so rare to our ears in this time of division and polarization and dispute.

And what's really important for you to see about this passage from 1 Corinthians is that this is a transition point in the reading. Paul is writing the people of Corinth. And the people of Corinth are experiencing significant divisions between those who are powerful and those who are powerless, between those who are wealthy and those who are poor, between those who feel that they are above the law and those who follow the rules almost rigidly to the point of compulsivity.

And Paul from the beginning has been trying to point his way to Jesus Christ as the model of all community, as the source of all community. And last week we read one of the main images that he gives that we spend a lot of time on, which is that he says to them, we are all members of the same body. Those of us who disagree with one another, all of us have a certain place. The hand cannot say to the rest of the body, I have no need of thee. And that was an ancient image. You can find it in other great literature of antiquity where the whole would be compared to a body. And the members are compared to the members and limbs of a body and the organs of a body, all of us having to work together. In fact, Plato in *The Republic* at one point says that the best republic is one where when one pinky hurts, the whole body feels the pain.

But then there is a transition point right before our reading today from 1 Corinthians. After speaking to them about being members of the same body, and understanding that there is a kind of unity and diversity, Paul says, "And still, I will show you a more excellent way." And when he makes that change, he launches into this hymn of love that we have just read. And this pivot point in 1 Corinthians has been for me the most important part of the entire epistle, that movement from being members together in one body, to bearing one another's

burdens and sharing one another's joys and sufferings in love. That to me was key.

And a few years ago, I preached a sermon on the point at which that happens, which is 1 Corinthians 12:31 where Paul says, "Still, I will show you a more excellent way, a better way of being in this world." And after I finished the sermon, one of the millennials in the crowd came up to me and he said, dude, I'm going to get that tattooed on my body. And I said, okay, I will too. So I have a tattoo. Right here it says *Ad huc excellentiorum viam*, still a more excellent way. I don't regret it, but I have to say, I was surprised at its permanency.

And that transition is always behind us and before us. That transition to love is so key. But when I think of this passage, I don't think merely about a tattoo. I think about the promises that I made in my relationship with my wife, because this passage often is said at weddings. And that marriage I have to Claire has been one of the greatest blessings in my life. It goes deeper than the skin. It's made a more indelible mark upon me. And while I will take the risk that you might get lost in romantic thinking, if I go in this direction, I believe that somehow in this passage, which we all read at times when people are making their promises, this passage has a kind of appropriateness, not merely to marriage, but to any kind of covenantal relationship we live in. And that, that marriage can be a kind of lens through which we can see the greater power of the passage.

And so the song that I thought of is a song that Claire has sung in the past. It's actually one that resonates with this passage. It's by James Taylor and it is The Water is Wide. I've asked Claire to sing it and then I'll say something else.

The water is wide, I can't cross over  
And neither have I wings to fly  
Build me a boat that can carry two  
And both shall row, my love and I

There is a ship, and she sails the sea  
She's loaded deep, as deep can be  
But not so deep as the love I'm in  
I know not how I sink or swim

O, love is handsome and love is fine  
The sweetest flower when first it's new  
But love grows old and waxes cold  
And fades away like summer dew

The water is wide, I can't cross over  
And neither have I wings to fly  
Build me a boat that can carry two

And both shall row, my love and I  
And both shall row, my love and I

So I asked Claire to play this song because it is about a relationship. These words, this song was originally written somewhere around the 16th century in Scotland. And it was initially known as a kind of lament. It was for a lost love, either the love was separated by distance, or it was separated by death and it was known as Waly, Waly or Wale, Wale in the Scottish Gaelic. And over the years, it began to build up for itself – different stanzas would come in, different verses would come in and the song began to move from lament to a kind of hope in love.

And so you see that lament in that moment where it says, “But love grows old and waxes cold and fades away like summer dew.” And a similar kind of lament verse came out in Scotland sometime in the 16th century where it said,

I leaned my back against an oak  
Thinking it was a trusty tree  
But first it bent and then it broke  
So did my love prove false to me

And that kernel of lament is incredibly powerful and says something real about the nature of any kind of marriage or covenantal relationship, because there's only so much that your nerve endings can do when you're in love. And love itself is subject to change. We lose people. We get separated by distance. Things happen in a relationship. So that is part of even any kind of greater relationship, there's a kind of death to human love. But the larger message of the song is that love is larger than our human love. There is a larger love that is, like we read, an ocean that a ship can sail that we cannot swim but we can somehow find in a boat. And that boat is the relationship. That boat is the bond. That boat is the marriage. And it's able somehow when two people get in and decide to row, that they will find their way across that ocean and find that greater love.

And in the 19th century, a verse emerged on this song from Australia that speaks to that. It says:

Love is the center of all we see  
Love is the jewel that guides us true  
No matter what love,  
You'll stay with me  
No matter what, my love,  
I'll stay with you

So this beautiful love song that I've lifted up for you today is a way, I believe, to get into the reading today from 1 Corinthians chapter 13, it helps me see

something new about it. And it comes right at the end where Paul says, when I was a child, I spoke as a child. I thought as a child, I reasoned as a child, but when I became an adult, I put an end to childish ways. Love, in other words, is for grownups. Love requires us to put away childish thinking, to put away childish reasoning, to put away childish speech. And the primary way that happens is when our focus of attention is no longer on ourselves, but on our beloved and on the relationship.

The second thing I see that this song helps clarify, and the passage comes right after that, when we read that, "For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then we will see face to face." Love is a time in which we move from seeing merely the reflection of ourselves, our hopes, our dreams, our aspirations, and we finally move into something larger than we could ever imagine. When God's love becomes the ocean that we swim in, the ocean that our ships move through, when God's love becomes part of that story, we are changed. We begin to see things greater than just the reflection of ourselves, just the mirror of ourselves, but actually the love that exists in deeper intimacy.

And the final thing that I see in this passage that is incredibly powerful to me is that love is something that is eternal because God is love. And here Paul takes his own spin on something we read in 1 John chapter 4, where we read there the plain words "God is love." "Love is God," For Paul, God's love has been perfectly revealed in Jesus Christ. So that love that is revealed and that Paul elevates, that hymn to love that Paul speaks of when he makes that transition from merely thinking about the community as the body to thinking what that body can do when it is transformed by love, that person that Paul has in mind when he paints the picture in 1 Corinthians, is Jesus Himself.

Paul isn't speaking about something beautiful in the abstract when he writes that love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. When Paul is writing those words, he's thinking about Jesus Christ who bears all things, believes all things, endures all things and suffers all things so that we might know God's love, so that we might find that ocean of love, so that we might make that journey, so that we might get into the boat and row.

Now, the final thing I see that is revealed in this passage by the song is that love is a choice. We liked to behave and believe. As if love just happens upon us like a fever, something we cannot control, but love is an exercise of will. We can decide to love. We can choose to love. And this is because God chose us, because God loved us. And the greatest expression of love in this world is the choice we make to love those God has given us.

Now all of this can speak to a marriage, but it speaks to every kind of covenantal relationship. It speaks to every kind of bond that we have and share together. Our calling as Christians is to choose love. And this love exists not merely in our most intimate relationships. It exists in our church, in our community, even in our

country, we can choose to love. And just like you have in human relationships where one person decides to be immature and then everybody else becomes immature, almost like a pebble, hitting a puddle. So in human relationships, one person can choose to be mature and cause a ripple that goes throughout the entire pond.

Paul is calling his congregation to find their way to Christian maturity. Paul is telling his congregation that they are grownups, so they must love like grownups. Paul is saying to them, get into the boat and row and find your way to the even greater love that you cannot yet imagine that is waiting for you that is in your life.

bell hooks, one of the great philosophers that we lost in 2021, wrote an incredible book on love in which she said, the thing that is most missing in our culture today is the kind of love that looks at the other with curiosity, attention, respect, and commitment. That is the kind of love we need. You and I have been called to that love. Christ has empowered us to be His love in the world, around us, and yet we have a part to play. And yet we have a part to play. So get into the boat and row.

Amen.