

Sermon for Sunday, February 3, 2019 - "Practicing Love"

Fourth Sunday after Epiphany
February 3, 2019
Good Shepherd Lutheran Church
Decorah, Iowa
Rev. Amy Zalk Larson

[Click here to read scripture passages for the day.](#)

Beloved of God, grace to you and peace in the name of Jesus, God's love made flesh.

I have attended or presided at A LOT of weddings. My spouse and I have good friends from high school, college, seminary and our summers working at Bible camps, as well as large extended families which means lots of weddings. The church I served right after seminary has a long center aisle, impressive stained-glass windows and a gorgeous altar up front. It's also located in the heart of Minnesota lake country. Those things added up to a whole lot of weddings in my first call. Then I served at Luther College where lots of people fall in love and ask their campus pastors to help them get married. All of this is to say that I'm quite familiar with our second reading from 1 Corinthians, chapter 13 - that passage on love that is so often read at weddings.

It's a beautiful passage, but it's hard to preach it at a wedding, especially because the apostle Paul wrote it to a community that was facing conflict and having a hard time staying together.

That actually makes it a perfect passage to ponder *during* marriage. Marriage certainly involves conflict and times when it's really challenging to keep on loving the other person, as is the case in any significant relationship. Love is hard work. Yet, that isn't the message people really want to hear on a celebratory day as they stand in front of their family and friends.

It isn't the message we want to hear about our church community either. We don't want there to be conflict or difficulties. We want church to be a place where we feel welcomed, loved, connected, and a place where everyone gets along. Often congregations are that way - often Good Shepherd is. Yet congregations are made up of human beings; so, conflicts and challenges are going to be part of the mix. And something powerful happens when we stick with each other, even when it's hard. We experience so much growth, beauty and grace when we keep on showing up for each other even when we don't feel particularly loving. That isn't always possible - sometimes marriages, relationships and congregations become toxic and it isn't good or safe to stay in them. Sometimes people need to change congregations in order to more fully love God and serve others. Yet, if it's safe and possible, there is power in staying, in practicing love well after the honeymoon phase is over.

And love really does take practice, work, effort. Paul makes that clear in 1 Corinthians 13. He shows us that love is not really about feelings. It's about concrete actions that we take for others and actions we avoid for the sake of others. His point gets lost in the English translation when we hear love is patient, love is kind, love is not irritable or rude - a long list of adjectives. That makes it sound like love means always feeling patient and kind, never feeling grumpy or annoyed.

But the way Paul actually wrote the passage, those words aren't adjectives describing love in some flowery, abstract sense; those words are verbs. He uses sixteen verbs in a row to say what love does and does not do. Paul says to love is to be patient, to be kind, to not be jealous, not boast, not be arrogant, not be rude and not seek our own way, not be irritable, not be resentful and not rejoice in wrongdoing. To love is to rejoice in the truth, to bear all things, to believe all things, to hope all things, to endure all things. Paul is saying love is active and concrete. It takes work, it takes practice.

One of the gifts of healthy families, friendships and congregations is that they give us the chance to practice love when we feel good and when we don't.

Recently, I read this passage at the funeral of a ninety-three-year-old member of Good Shepherd. These words I've heard and read at so many weddings came alive to me again as I considered how this woman and her beloved spouse lived out love for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health for over sixty-two years.

These words come alive for me again as I think about the concrete ways you all do love for others in our congregation and community - bringing meals, doing grocery shopping, driving immigrant neighbors to court hearings, and visiting people even when they no longer remember you. You do this when it feels good and when it is hard.

This passage comes alive for me again today as we head into our annual meeting after 60 years as a congregation. This congregation, like all congregations, has known great joy and deep sorrow, times of energy and vitality, times of struggle and conflict.

Often it feels really good to be together as we worship, sing, serve and share in fellowship. Other times, it is harder. There are times you may even have an urge to throw someone over a cliff - the way Jesus' home congregation tried to do to him. Do resist that urge, of course. But even if you feel that way, it doesn't mean you can't love that person. Love means choosing to be patient, choosing to show kindness, choosing to look for the good in that person no matter how we feel.

This is hard. It's why we need a lot of practice in families, in friendships, and congregations in order to learn to live out love.

It's why we need God who chooses to love us always no matter what, why we need God who forgives and heals and strengthens us always.

God comes to us in really concrete ways - in water and word, bread and wine, flesh and blood, in the body of Christ - to actively love us, to do love for us.

God knows and sees us fully and chooses to love us always. Because we are loved so deeply, we can love others no matter how we feel.

Let's take a moment for silent prayer.