

When my wife and I were planning our wedding, we spent hours going over the particulars of the ceremony: who we wanted to read or pray, what songs we wanted to sing, how we wanted to order everything. There was one thing we agreed upon from the very beginning, though: we didn't want a reading of I Corinthians 13.

It's not that either of us dislike Paul's hymn about love; it's just been trotted out so many times in so many different contexts that it's hard to really hear it, to look at it with fresh eyes. Four years later we're still happy with how the ceremony turned out, but I've begun to think that I was a little too hard on this passage. Love is supposed to complete us, to reorient our lives, to inspire the best works of art and beauty (and also wars and conflicts). It's easy to see why Paul's exalted language here resonates with so many people as they prepare to make the biggest commitment of their lives. The familiarity is warm, reassuring.

In my work as a therapist there are numerous things which bring people into my office, yet most of my patients can trace the beginnings of their difficulties to a crisis of love. The absent love of a parent, the fleeting love of a partner, the painful love of a parent for a child that doesn't seem to love them back, the abuse and the heartbreak that masquerades itself as love. Love is something almost everyone can agree is important, wishes to experience, and struggles to describe. If you're looking for a definition of love you can of course consult the famous middle part of our passage: Love is patient, love is kind, etc., and I don't wish to ignore that, but today I mainly want to focus on the latter part of our epistle reading.

Beginning with verse 8, Paul says, "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." Tongues and prophecy we can live without, but knowledge? Knowledge seems to be essential to what we think of as love. After all, it's considered bad form to tell someone you love them on a first date; love takes knowledge, it takes time. If we're honest with ourselves, many of us would probably admit that one of our deepest fears is that our loved ones will find out some heretofore unknown bit about us which will extinguish their love. So what is Paul up to?

He goes on, "For we know only in part, and we prophesy only in part; but when the complete comes, the partial will come to an end." I want to suggest that Paul has something apocalyptic in mind here. Now when I say apocalyptic, I can imagine what might flash through your mind. The *Left Behind* books which were popular in the community I come from and terrified me as an adolescent depict the world coming to an end via a fundamentalist reading of Revelation. Maybe you think of tv shows like *The Walking Dead* or movies like *Mad Max* or *The Road* that depict a small band of survivors trying desperately to carry on in the ashes of civilization. Behind all of these depictions is the idea that when things start to fall apart we'll see the world as it really is, either overrun by non-believers or barely held together by laws meant to restrain our essential animality. The end of the world is a trope often used to spell out what's wrong with things in the present and a prediction of where they might be headed if we don't change course. Even the word "apocalypse" has a doom-and-gloom resonance in our modern usage, but the word in Greek simply means "unveiling." In this passage Paul is pulling back the curtain, not just on the end of the world but on its beginning and everything that comes in between, and what he finds is...love. Not a rapture, not zombies, but love.

Although this passage is typically linked with romantic love, that's not exactly what Paul has in mind here. Only a few chapters before our passage today he concedes that it's okay for Christians to marry if the alternative is burning with lust but it would be better if they could stay single like he is. In the intervening centuries we've swung the pendulum in the opposite direction to laud the family, and until recently only the heterosexual family, as a sort of special locus of God's favor. That's not only unbiblical--most families in the Bible are messes, after all--it's also profoundly alienating to those who are single or who have become single, whether through choice, chance, or the death of a partner. The love which Paul has in mind here contains but goes beyond the love between partners. It includes everyone.

That God is love is one of those essential building blocks of faith, usually one of the first things we tell our children. But yet, like all things that seem so obvious, it's painfully easy to forget. I would wager that most of us still struggle to embrace God's love beyond an intellectual acknowledgement.

Former Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams writes in "The Body's Grace"¹ that the whole message of Christianity, the reason for all of this, is "so that we may grow into the wholehearted love of God by learning that God loves us as God loves God." Our task as the Church, then, is to remind ourselves and remind others that we are desired, that we are, in his words, "the occasion of joy" for God. Can you imagine what the world would be like if Christians were known for telling others that God delights in them?

Learning that we are occasions of joy for God helps us begin to comprehend how we can be that for others as well. In Williams' account the primary way that relationships have sacramental significance is through taking time for one another and committing to one's identity being formed in part by someone else--now that I am Elena's father, I will never see myself in the same way or be seen by others in the same way because she exists. This of course can be scary which is why the biggest relationships we enter into are almost always done in the presence of others.

It is precisely because love involves this risk, this vulnerability, that it is so easily corrupted and becomes not a means of grace but a means of pain. Parents may not be up to the task of loving their children as they deserve, usually though not always because they themselves did not experience it when they were children. Partners can take advantage of the naked vulnerability love requires to inflict all manner of hurts upon the other. We can ache with the desire to share this love for someone else but worry that we'll never have that opportunity.

How often I've wished that I had an easy answer to all of this when someone enters into my office, the air thick with their pain. I don't. Paul doesn't either, but instead he offers us something else. Love doesn't complete us, make us whole, because we are made whole already by the freely given love of God that pours out upon our world just like the sun's rays. The God who sewed the world together loves you not out of duty but delight and gives us the freedom to be that for others. Every time we do so, no matter how small, we are taking part in the healing of the world. Not a bad reading for a wedding after all, I suppose.

¹ <https://www.anglican.ca/wp-content/uploads/2010/10/the-bodys-grace.pdf>