

Sometimes Love Looks Like This

1 Corinthians 13

Rev. Dan Schumacher

He's a Catholic Priest in Richmond, Virginia, and he shared a story that I'll never forget.

His name is Father Michael Renninger, and he's been a preacher and pastor for nearly 25 years now. But this story came long before his ministry began, even before his seminary days. He was still a freshman in college — a whopping 19-years old when it happened. He'd stopped by to visit his grandparents unannounced.

He says that his family used to call his grandmother "the queen of bingo," because she didn't just play bingo, she *lived* bingo. His grandfather's passion was sitting in his recliner watching his beloved Philadelphia Phillies lose. He'd curse at the TV, grandkids around or not, as they lost again and again. They were quite the pair.

They lived in a modest row home in the Philadelphia suburbs. They were hardworking folk, he says. They didn't have much money. Frankly, they didn't have much at all. But in retirement, they found simple luxuries — he in his recliner cursing at his favorite ball club, she in bingo... until the summer of 1982, when his grandfather had a series of strokes that left him paralyzed on the left side of his body.

After the stroke, he was debilitated. He could no longer walk. He couldn't speak. And he couldn't even swallow.

So, the doctors inserted a feeding tube into his stomach, and they advised that his grandmother find a nursing home where he could be cared for. But, she wouldn't have it. Instead, she announced at the hospital that she was going to take him home and learn to care for him there, because that's what you do.

And that's what she did, he says.

The comfortable recliner was moved out of the living room and replaced by a hospital bed. She had to learn a whole new set of skills so that she could become his caretaker. She had to learn how to bathe him, though he could no longer use the left side of his body. She had to learn how to communicate with him, though he could no longer speak. She even had to learn how to feed him using that feeding tube. Renninger recalls that it was a green liquid food, and that all the grandkids — himself included — called it "the green goop."

Slowly, but surely they settled into their new normal.

He says that at 19, their little row home was not far from where he was then enrolled in college. So, one Friday afternoon he decided to stop in and see his grandparents unannounced.

He parked his car and walked across the street to their house, up the familiar dusty steps of the old front porch. He pulled open the squeaky screen door, stepped inside, and, immediately, he knew that something was not right.

As his eyes adjusted, he said that he could see his grandfather there in that hospital bed, his face red, his working arm flailing in frustration. His grandmother stood over him, flustered and moving things around. That's when he could see the problem.

Something had gone wrong with the feeding tube. The green goop had splurged and splattered everywhere. His grandfather's lap was covered in it, his naked body exposed to the room as his grandmother tried to get him cleaned up.

Renninger says that, at 19, he felt awkward in that moment, like he was witnessing an embarrassing moment that he should not be watching unfold. He turned on his heel. He grabbed that screen door, and as it squeaked it caught the attention of his grandmother. And, his grandmother — who had never raised her voice to him before — said in a stern voice, "Don't you dare... Don't you dare leave! Sometimes love looks like this" (a sermon from the 4th Sunday after Epiphany: Year C, 2016).

Sometimes love looks like this...

Love is made most evident — is seen most clearly — when life is messy.

Love is easy when everything is humming along just fine. It's easy when the bills are paid and work is meaningful and everyone is in good health.

But what about when the bank account is stretched too thin or the work is hard and thankless or the recliner has to be replaced with a hospital bed? Love isn't so easy then.

I decided to break with the lectionary text this week. Right now, I'm supposed to be preaching on the story of when Joseph was sold into slavery by his own brothers. But I'm sensing that we, as a church family, need to be reminded of who we are called to be.

We've been apart for too long, and I suspect that we're forgetting that we love each other.

A global pandemic has kept us from gathering. Civil unrest and issues around race have captured our attention once again. And, to top it all off, we're in the midst of an election year — which means everything is heightened, everything is tense, everything is partisan, everything feels like a fight for votes.

I'm not sure you know this, but pastors *hate* pastoring during election years. Even when there's not a global pandemic happening we hate it! We hate it because the national atmosphere becomes so tense, so divisive that we feel like we're walking a tight rope act. We fear that one misstep will bring the whole show falling to the ground.

It's so easy, isn't it, to start dividing ourselves, separating ourselves, building invisible walls around ourselves so that we surrounded only by those who sound like us, who think like us, who believe like us, who vote like us?

It's enticing, isn't it?

There's no tension if I only have to have conversations with those who already agree with me. There are no arguments if I am only those who believe like me. There are no fights if I only listen to those who affirm what I already believe.

But what does that mean in a church like ours? A church where we know that we are a *wide* river – theologically, politically, and otherwise.

What does that mean for this body that can't gather together, look each other in the eye, greet each other with handshakes and hugs, and *remember that we actually do love each other?*

I suspect that it's hard for us to separate this passage from 1 Corinthians, chapter 13, from the sound of wedding bells and tiered cakes and first dances. 1 Corinthians 13 is emblazoned on napkins, printed on invitations, read in wedding ceremonies every day.

This past week, Christen and I celebrated our 18th anniversary, and we had 1 Corinthians 13 read at our wedding. But believe it or not, Paul was not officiating a wedding when he wrote 1 Corinthians 13. If anything, he was officiating a wrestling match. He was referring a boxing match, a grudge match, an MMA-winner-take-all-cage-match. He was in the midst of a church that was hellbent on tearing itself apart. And we all know that nobody fights as dirty or as ruthlessly as church people.

First Church of Corinth fought about everything; whose spiritual gifts were superior; whose baptisms were superior; whose morality was superior; whose actions and ethics were superior; whose station in life was superior; whose abilities and services were superior; who was the greatest and why.

Whose baptism was better – those baptized by Paul or Barnabas? Whose spiritual gifts were better – those who spoke in tongues or those who had the gifts of prophecy? Should slaves and poor people be allowed to share the Lord's table with the wealthy – even if they didn't bring anything to share? Who was more important – the smart people or the ones with extraordinary amounts of faith?

How is it that we get so caught up in being “right” that we forget how to be Church?

The church in Corinth was being torn apart from the inside out by the need to be “right.” Which is precisely why Paul wrote them a love letter. If they could only make *love* their top priority, then the other things wouldn't be so divisive. So he wrote these words – not for a wedding, but for a church on the verge of divorce:

“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.”

Out of one of the worst, most dysfunctional and conflict-ridden churches in all of the ancient world came one of the most inspiring passages in all of scripture.

Paul understood that love was the antidote for what ailed them. And — in the midst of a global pandemic, social unrest, and an election year — it’s our antidote, too.

I’m not saying it’s easy. In fact, I’m saying the opposite. I’m saying it’s hard. It’s difficult. It’s uncomfortable. And, at times, it’s downright messy. But *sometimes love looks like this*.

Church family, a body like ours — a congregation as diverse as ours — only has one way forward. Our only way forward together is *love*.

The late, great John Lewis used to tell this story:

“I was four years old at the time, too young to understand there was a war going on over in Europe and out in the Pacific as well... The only world I knew was the one I stepped out into each morning, a place of thick pine forests and white cotton fields and red clay roads winding around my family’s house in our little corner of Pike County, Alabama.

We had just moved that spring onto some land my father had bought, the first land anyone in his family had ever owned — 110 acres of cotton and corn and peanut fields, along with an old but sturdy three-bedroom house, a large house for that part of the county, the biggest place for miles around. It had a well in the front yard, and pecan

trees out back, and muscadine grapevines growing wild in the woods all around us — *our* woods...

On this particular afternoon — it was a Saturday, I'm almost certain — about fifteen of us children were outside my Aunt Seneva's house, playing in her dirt yard. The sky began clouding over, the wind started picking up, lightning flashed far off in the distance, and suddenly I wasn't thinking about playing anymore; I was terrified.

I had already seen what lighting could do. I'd seen fields catch on fire after a hit to a haystack. I'd watched trees actually explode when a bolt of lightning struck them, the sap inside rising to an instant boil, the trunk swelling until it burst its bark. The sight of those strips of pine bark snaking through the air like ribbons was both fascinating and horrifying.

Lightening terrified me and so did thunder...

Aunt Seneva was the only adult around, and as the sky blackened and the wind grew stronger, she herded us all inside.

Her house was not the biggest place around, and it seemed even smaller with so many children squeezed inside. Small and surprisingly quiet. All of the shouting and laughter that had been going on early, outside, had stopped. The wind was howling now, and the house was starting to shake. We were scared. Even Aunt Seneva was scared.

And then it got worse. Now the house was beginning to sway. The wood plank flooring beneath us began to bend. And then, a corner of the room started lifting up.

I couldn't believe what I was seeing. None of us could. This storm was actually pulling the house toward the sky. With us inside it.

And that is when Aunt Seneva told us to clasp hands. Line up and hold hands, she said, and we did as we were told. Then she had us walk as a group toward the corner of the room that was rising. From the kitchen to the front of the house we walked, the wind screaming outside, sheets of rain beating on the tin roof. Then we walked back the other direction, as another end of the house began to lift.

And so it went, back and forth, fifteen children walking with the wind, holding that trembling house down with the weight of our small bodies.

More than a half century has passed since that day, and it has struck me more than once over those many years that our society is not unlike the children in that house, rocked again and again by the winds of one storm or another, the walls around us seeming at times as if they might fly apart.

It seemed that way in the 1960s, at the height of the civil rights movement, when America itself felt as if it might burst at the seams — so much tension, so many storms.

But the people of conscience never left the house. They never ran away. They stayed, they came together and they did the best they could, clasping hands and moving toward the corner of the house that was the weakest.

And then another corner would lift, and we would go there.

And eventually, inevitably, the storm would settle, and the house would still stand.

But we knew another storm would come, and we would have to do it all over again.

And we did.

And we still do, all of us. You and I. Children holding hands, walking with the wind" (*Walking with the Wind*, 11-13).

First Baptist family, we aren't that different from the image of John Lewis and his cousins so many years ago. We have been in the midst of a storm — a storm that has threatened to tear this house apart.

But every time it has tried to lift our house off its moorings, we have grasped each other and — arm-in-arm — have walked to its weakest spot and held it down against the force of the storm... and we have done it together.

Only *together*. Do you hear me First Baptist family? Only together. Because sometimes love looks like this.

Amen.