

1 Corinthians 13
August 22, 2010

South Plains

It's Not About Love

The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune have lately given me reason to think hard about marriage, what is it that attracts two people to marry and what keeps them married. Too many of my friends are finding marriage an unsatisfying experience that they want to escape. This afternoon our sanctuary will host another wedding. Both the bride and groom live out of town, but they want to live in Charlottesville; and they like South Plains Presbyterian Church. So, they asked to be married here.

I mention this couple because of the scripture readings they have chosen for the wedding. Like many others, they have fallen for St. Paul's love chapter in 1 Corinthians 13. "Love" is the umbrella word spreading itself over courtship and weddings, covering a multitude of our sins, protecting us from doubts and uncertainties, answering all questions, deflecting attacks on a relationship the way Teflon deflects dirt and pointing us dreamily toward the end of rainbow where that pot of gold is waiting.

The trouble is that the kind of romantic love pictured by our sweet weddings is not the love depicted in Paul's chapter in the letter to the Corinthians. 1 Corinthians 13 is not about love, at least not about the

kind of love that we see in steamy magazines like the one I found in a waiting room the other day advertising 99 ways to drive your man crazy with desire.

Marriage and romantic love were probably the last things Paul had in mind when he wrote this letter. He writes, "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 (v. 3)." That's the language of sacrificial giving, the language of ultimate worship; and in fact, Paul is talking about worship and how Christians treat each other.

Nevertheless, if we could come a little closer to the love Paul celebrates, then our worship, our churches, and our marriages would be happier. So, what is the recipe for this kind of love when it's applied to a marriage? The truth is there is no recipe. Part of our fantasy, one of our foolish illusions about love, is the belief that there is a formula we can follow for a happy marriage: If only we have the right family, the pure church, the up-to-date therapy, the perfect wedding, or even the best lawyer to write the prenuptials. If we do it right with love, all will be well.

To the contrary, I believe God made us so wonderfully and terribly free, that there is no recipe guaranteed to produce a happy marriage. I do, however, believe that the ingredients for a good marriage are available. Any recipe to make nourishing food has certain basic elements, carbohydrates, proteins, fats,

sugars, fiber, etc. Here's my list of ingredients with the caveat that every couple has to put them together to suit themselves.

At the top of my list is faith. For us, it's faith in Jesus Christ and that's where my emphasis will fall this morning. But, I want to start with the broadest definition. Javier Bardem who stars in the new movie, "Eat Pray Love," says

Even if you don't practice any religion, we all pray. When things get wrong, we all close our eyes and we hope that there is somebody stronger and wiser and more able than us can help us." (*Associated Press* interview)

That nebulous faith is groping toward a larger purpose, a greater reality than me and my selfish wants. Too many marriages flounder on the rocks of conflict between what makes me happy versus what makes you happy. Even the Declaration of Independence recognizes that the pursuit of happiness is not enough by itself. The human enterprise needs some shared faith, some common authority, or for a marriage some communal experience of the awesome mystery of life that anchors our commitments.

My computer works best when the connectivity to the internet is strong. Faith in Jesus Christ strengthens out connectivity to the Creator and Ruler of life. It puts us in touch with the resources of scripture, church and the experience of centuries of faith. When we learn to utilize

those resources, we have at our disposal wisdom greater than our own. Faith secures love.

My second ingredient follows faith with faithfulness. If faith is the abstract trust or belief we profess, faithfulness is the concrete living out of our faith. The Ten Commandments protect the marriage of neighbors with the prohibition against adultery. This is the most basic root of a faithful marriage although it is never enough alone. A good marriage includes a commitment, not only to one's partner, but also to the marriage itself. A wise old man I knew sat down one day and listened to his daughter-in-law pour out her frustrations about her marriage to the man's son. When she finally became silent, he paused and said, "Kathy, you and I are both married to difficult people." His honesty touched her. Kathy told me of that conversation with enormous gratitude as we prepared for the old man's funeral. They had shared a faithful commitment to their marriages.

Paul says love "bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things (7)." He does not say that marriage endures all things. Even Jesus recognized the inevitability of divorce. Sometimes love can endure and hope and believe only because love chooses a divorce. That can be a hard, but sound faithfulness.

The third ingredient for a good marriage and a good life, and those good things do not always mean a

100% happy marriage; the third ingredient is an extended family, a network of supporters. Hopefully, this network of extended family will include both blood kin and chosen kin. At any rate, it's key to an enduring marriage.

Because our lives are so mobile, uprooting us several times from one community to another, separating us from kith and kin, this family will surely change as the years go by. Shortly after Debby and I married, we became good friends with two other couples. I remember clearly that the three families looked forward to supporting each other throughout our whole lives. But, the Vietnam War intervened and careers took us in different directions, and we lost touch. Thankfully, our network grew with other friends. It's like the safety net under the circus acrobats. Whatever the problem - circumstances, equipment failure or operator error - the safety net is there to help us bounce back. An extended family is critical.

My final ingredient has to be grace, lots of grace. I put grace at the end because I know very well my list of ingredients for a good marriage is incomplete. We always need more than we know, more than we've got, and certainly more than we can deserve.

The other passage often chosen by a couple for their wedding is the story of Ruth and Naomi that we heard this morning. It's another biblical passage that has nothing to do with marriage, but everything to do with the deepest kind of love. The widow Naomi is going home to

Israel. Her husband and sons are dead. In that culture, her only security is to return to relatives and hope that one of them will take her in. Ruth is the foreign daughter-in-law, also widowed, who just won't leave. When Naomi tries to send Ruth away, Ruth declares her loyalty to her mother-in-law:

Where you go, I will go;
where you lodge, I will lodge;
your people shall be my people,
and your God my God.

We may speculate about Ruth's faith and why this foreigner chooses to embrace Naomi's God as her God, but it's all guesswork. What we know for sure is that God's grace and providence are at work more powerfully than anything else. God will bring Ruth to marry Boaz who takes care of both Ruth and Naomi. Ruth and Boaz have a child named Obed. Obed's son was Jesse, and Jesse became the father of none other than David, the greatest king of Israel, the ancestor of Jesus.

It's a great story for second marriages and a greater story of the way God's grace intervenes to make marriage good for us and for God's highest purposes. As the story of the Bible continues, marriage becomes a favorite metaphor of the relationship between the Lord and the people of God. The church is the bride of Christ. I have to believe that the Holy Spirit uses that figure of speech so many times in scripture because the mystery of a good marriage, a healthy marriage, is as deep as the mystery of God's love for us.

There are many things we can believe and do and experience in order to strengthen and enrich our relationship to God, just as there are things we can believe and do and experience to enrich a marriage. In the end, marriage is a gift of grace, an underserved blessing.

Faith, faithfulness, an extended family network of support and a double handful of grace.

Last Wednesday, Public Broadcasting showed "South Pacific" on TV. It's a love story about war, prejudice, loneliness and laughter. I kept waiting for a twist in the plot or a song to explain how the lovers get together in the end. But, there is no explanation. It just happens in a moment of grace. Every marriage is lived moment, by moment, by moment of grace.