

Where is the Love?
The Monroe Congregational Church, UCC
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1 Corinthians 13:1-14a

There once was a farmer who owned only one horse. He depended on that horse for everything; to pull the plow, to draw the wagon, even to get to town. One day a bee stung the horse, and it spooked and ran away. The farmer searched for the horse, but couldn't find him. His neighbors said, "We are really sorry about your bad luck in losing your horse."

But the farmer shrugged and said, "Bad luck, good luck...who is to say?"

A week later the horse came back, accompanied by a half dozen other wild horses! The farmer was able to corral all these fine animals into his barn. News of his sudden winfall spread throughout the town, and his neighbors stopped by and said, "Congratulations on your good luck, that's quite a herd you've got now!"

To which the farmer once again shrugged and said, "Good luck, bad luck... who is to say?"

The 18 year old son of the farmer decided to make the most of their sudden fortune, and began to train the wild horses so they could be sold. Unfortunately, before long the son was thrown from one of them, and his leg was broken in three places. When word of his accident spread through the town, again the neighbors came by to offer their condolences, saying, "We are so sorry about the bad luck of your son getting hurt."

The old man shrugged and said, "Bad luck, good luck...who is to say?"

Two weeks later a war broke out. The army began conscripting every able-bodied young man from the farmer's small rural town. Because his son was injured, he did not have to go, and it turned out to save his life. Everyone in the town who was drafted that week suffered some kind of serious injury.

There is always more going on in any situation than we can ever know.

Who is to say how something will ultimately turn out, and to what effect (through the grace of God), even the worst moments will have upon our future?

Think about your life. That job that you lost. The engagement that was broken. The college application that was rejected. These are the moments that can bring us down a different path than we expected on our life's journey.

I like how Eugene Peterson has translated verses 12 and 13 of today's text in his contemporary paraphrase "The Message":

"We don't yet see things clearly. We are squinting in a fog, peering through the mist, but it will not be long before the weather clears and the sun shines bright! We will see it all then; see as clearly as God sees us, knowing God as directly as God knows us. But for right now, until that completeness comes, we have three things to do. Trust steadily in God, hope unswervingly, love extravagantly."

Paul insists that through the dark times, love is the most valuable gift God can bestow.

One of my favorite movies to see when I really need to laugh is the comedy "Wedding Crashers". In the film, two best friends named John and Jeremy sneak into weddings so that they can meet young, unattached women. Open bars and lavish food are also a bonus! The two men are really gifted at making up elaborate cover stories which both charm the crowd and get them out of trouble.

In one scene, the two are seated at a wedding ceremony; and when the pastor invites the bride's sister to read scripture, John says to Jeremy, "Twenty dollars, First Corinthians." To which Jeremy replies, "Double or nothing, Colossians 3:12." The bride's sister takes the podium and begins, *"And now a reading from Paul's first letter to the Corinthians."*

If I were a betting person, my money would have been on Corinthians also. Most couples ask for this text to be read at their weddings. In fact, of all the ceremonies at which I have presided, 76% of the couples picked this passage.

Never mind that the original context has nothing to do with romantic love at all!

Paul wrote this letter to challenge the church in Corinth. A church whose diversity generated discord and rivalry, which unleashed destructive patterns of behavior. The Corinthians fought contentiously over leadership and power, whose spiritual gifts were better and whose teacher was holier.

They were a community fragmented by their differences.

Paul passionately reminds them that love is a verb, an act of sheer will, one that they had better live out in their community or they will indeed perish.

As it turns out, most of us, at some time, will struggle with love.

Love requires patience, mercy, forbearance and kindness to be consistently applied by us to another person or group of persons. But we get tired. We make mistakes and hurt the ones we are supposed to care about. We fumble our way through trying to figure out what to do to show them how much we love them.

Why is it that so many of us dread going home to our families for the holidays?

Or why is it that so many of us begin a marriage wanting to love each other, but instead lash out at our spouse when we feel stressed or anxious, as if hurting them will make us feel better?

And why is it that we can become so angry with a friend that we can storm off and toss away a relationship that has been in our lives for many years?

Where is the love?

We need help with love, just as we need help understanding what love is not. Paul says love is not self-seeking, short-tempered or offensive. In other words, love does not hurt people. Love is the only means by which we have a chance to live fully in the knowledge and fellowship of our Creator.

Theologian Karoline Lewis wrote of a recent trip to the Middle East and how it can be hard this kind of love can be:

"A couple of evenings ago on our trip we had a presentation by the Parent's Circle, a grassroots organization for Palestinians and Israelis who have lost loved ones due to the conflict. The representatives who spoke to us were two fathers, a Palestinian and an Israeli, who had both lost daughters because of the ongoing conflict between Israel and Palestine.

We had a very honest discussion about the conflict and about life before and after the Separation Wall... They each went through their own moments of wondering how life could possibly carry on given the death of their children due to such senseless, mindless fighting. They could have chosen revenge to ease their pain but instead realized that the only way forward was to talk to each other.

In each other, they found the way to carry on because, in their words, "our blood is the same color; our tears are just as bitter." They found a way to carry on that chose peace instead of revenge, conversation instead of fear, life instead of death because "it is not our destiny to kill each other in this Holy Land." At stake for both fathers was peace. Simple as that. This is the gospel. This is love."

Make no mistake, friends, the love Paul is talking about is not passive or fluffy. This kind of love is an up at dawn, feet on the ground, tools in hand, working hard kind of love. It builds communities. It nurtures positive social interactions, and not just shallow social networks.

Paul's declaration of love unifies. Love is the way by which we talk to each other, eat with one another and spend time together. Love transcends our self-imposed caste systems and personal biases. It forms whole and holistic people, who are anchored in the well-being of others.

And love will not let us down if we genuinely live in it together. May it be so, and may it be soon. Amen.