

Sunday, January 17, 2016 - Love Does Hard Things: Marriage

1 Corinthians 13:1-10 (MSG)

Marysville UMC

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Last week, Aaron and I were having a Friday date night at our house and looking at old emails we wrote to each other while we were dating. As we read each of them, we kept rolling our eyes. We wrote such cheesy things! Our feelings now are more about who changed the last dirty diaper, who's going to entertain Wesley during his nightly dinner whining as we get food ready, who forgot to pay the credit card bill and now our account is frozen over the weekend, who's family are we going to spend the next vacation with and is it really their turn?

Marriage is hard. Especially the times you feel disconnected. There are a million miles between you. And yet life continues to move forward. So you're forced to make repairs as you go - to adjust the sails - to work on things while life continues. Which makes it tempting to keep drifting without doing the work. Which feels like it works for a while. Until you hit a new season of life - having children, empty nest, death of a loved one, a job changes - and the ship starts to sink if you're not doing the work along the way.

This message today is for all of us. Some of us are currently in a marriage covenant. Some of us used to be. Some of us will be in the near future. Some of us are in a relationship that until very recently, wasn't considered legal. And now it is. We rejoice with you. Some of us have lost the one to whom we were married and we're trying to figure out life without them. Some of us are in a marriage covenant relationship that feels disconnected and dead at times. Some of us are new in marriage and wondering if we've got what it takes to make this last a lifetime.

So we come to this conversation with some...baggage. That's okay. We've all got some.

If you're not married and wondering how this message will be helpful to you, know that these ideas about love will work in pretty much any relationship. You'll be able to live them out with your friends, your children and others.

Here's what I think we can accomplish today: We'll look at the most popular love text in the whole Bible in a new light. We'll reflect on how the love between people in a marriage is incredibly responsive. We'll talk about how score cards affect relationships. Then we'll look at some questions and resources for you to continue the conversation this week. My goal for you today: I want you to better understand and enjoy this mysterious, extraordinary, difficult, beautiful, frustrating, complicated gift called marriage.

Rob and Kristen Bell wrote a great book called, "The Zimzum of Love." Their work has greatly inspired this message today. In the book they wrote this:

There's a paradox at the heart of love:

You don't need anybody,

but you need someone.

You are fine on your own,

but you are not fine on your own.

How is it that the same relationship can be capable of producing so much joy *and* so much pain? How is it that the slightest thoughts and actions can so significantly change the space between two people? How is it that flawed, fragile, flesh-and-blood human beings can relate to each other in such a way that they show each other the divine?

How many of you have heard 1 Corinthians 13 read at a wedding? *Love is patient, love is kind...*

Today we'll hear it in a new way. Eugene Peterson's "Message" version.

13 *If I speak with human eloquence and angelic ecstasy but don't love, I'm nothing but the creaking of a rusty gate. 2 If I speak God's Word with power, revealing all his mysteries and making everything plain as day, and if I have faith that says to a mountain, "Jump," and it jumps, but I don't love, I'm nothing. 3-7 If I give everything I own to the poor and even go to the stake to be burned as a martyr, but I don't love, I've gotten nowhere. So, no matter what I say, what I believe, and what I do, I'm bankrupt without love.*

*Love never gives up.
Love cares more for others than for self.
Love doesn't want what it doesn't have.
Love doesn't strut,
Doesn't have a swelled head,
Doesn't force itself on others,
Isn't always "me first,"
Doesn't fly off the handle,
Doesn't keep score of the sins of others,
Doesn't revel when others grovel,
Takes pleasure in the flowering of truth,
Puts up with anything,
Trusts God always,
Always looks for the best,
Never looks back,
But keeps going to the end.*

8-10 Love never dies. Inspired speech will be over some day; praying in tongues will end; understanding will reach its limit. We know only a portion of the truth, and what we say about God is always incomplete. But when the Complete arrives, our incompletes will be canceled.

Scripture reflection

When I was in high school and college, I was intent on finding the right person to marry. My teen Bible at the time had a little note section under 1 Corinthians 13 with some things to look for in the person you might marry. I remember dating someone and mentally checking off things from that list. Then coming to some things that didn't match and starting to think this wasn't going to be "the one." What I needed to learn, that I'm working on now...is these elements of love are **only possible with God's help**. Remember our baptismal vows from last week - "with God's help..."

You cannot achieve this kind of love on your own. Not possible. I can't. Maybe for a little while - but not for very long. If you can, please show me how.

These words were given to the church in Corinth by Paul. He was encouraging the Corinthians to stop focusing so much on speaking in tongues (which no one understands) and instead pursue love for each other. So, yes this text is often used in weddings to talk about marital love. But it was originally used to describe the love people were to have for each other, regardless of the type of relationship. This is body of Christ kind of love.

Love Takes Work - But That's What Love Does

I love getting to work with couples who are about to get married. We talk about all kinds of fun things like communication, money, having kids, intimacy, fears they have about getting married. I often share what I'm learning about marriage myself. I tell them it still surprises me how much work it takes. Yes, there are many moments where I can't believe I'm married to this wonderful person who loves me more than I deserve. And yes, there are many moments where I can't believe I'm married to this irritating, obsessively clean, won't-try-avocado, 49ers-loving husband.

And it takes great work to love people we don't always like. Which is all of our relationships. These are the moments that our faith makes a difference. Are we going to love like Jesus? Or say something snarky and walk away?

It's one thing to be *in* love; it's another to act *because* of love. Love is a noun—a feeling you *have*—and it's also a verb, something you *do*.

Because I talk about love a lot - it's easy for me to think I'm good at it. But increasing self awareness and conversations with my husband always remind me I've got a lot to work on.

I still tend to reach out and connect when I *feel* like it. Not because this is what love does. So for us, the conversation lately has been all about **habits**. It's not that we're terribly disconnected - it's that we've built up unhelpful habits over time. So if we choose new habits to work on together, then it's likely those can turn into new natural patterns of who we are in marriage together. In theory. :)

So as you think of your relationship - where might God be inviting you to act *because* of love, whether you *feel* like it or not?

Scorecard & Sacrifice

Who has a score card in their marriage? The scorecard is how we keep track of how much we're giving and how much they're giving and who's sacrificing more and whose carrying more of the weight and who's got the lighter load and who's taken on more of the responsibility so that the other can pursue their goals and who's working harder at the relationship and who owes more and who's turn it is to empty the dishwasher.

The scorecard is at the heart of an extraordinary number of fights; it lurks in the shadows of lots of heated discussions, and if it's not addressed and is left unchecked, it can poison the space between you. The scorecard is rooted in resentment, and the space between you is highly responsive to resentment. Even the slightest tremors of bitterness can block the flow of love.

In order to get rid of the scorecard, you have to choose to act in love instead of in fear. Someone has to move toward the other first in love, not fear.

Some have figured out the big thing that helps the scorecard disappear is **sacrifice**. One of you stretches for one season and then the other for another season; you each give and you each make sacrifices— it's all part of marriage. If you keep this up over time— this back and forth, this give and take— you eventually begin to lose track of who's been giving and sacrificing more. And the scorecard starts to disappear.

Normalize counseling

Some of you remember me talking on Christmas Eve about the argument with my husband and me having the opportunity to move closer with grace - but I didn't. Can I tell you one of the biggest catalysts that helps me choose love over fear?

Prayer changes my heart, journaling and reflection helps, reading the Bible helps a lot. The biggest game changer for me has been **counseling and therapy**. My parents made it a normal thing when we were growing up. We've all got stuff to deal with - and we can't do that on our own. Every time we turn towards our pain instead of running from it - every time we're brave and really feel our pain and surrender to it - and name it and share it with someone else -- that is the beginning of a resurrection -- and for me, that's what happens in counseling.

Pain and discomfort and the gnawing sense that things could be better are your friends. They wake you up, they stir you to action, they motivate you to get help. This may mean initiating difficult conversations, finding help in a book or class or retreat, or seeing a therapist or doctor or spiritual director.

In many marriages, we have brought something to the space that we haven't dealt with, and it's affecting both people. Until you deal with it, it will continue to have a negative effect on the flow between you. The space, however, is highly responsive, and it's surprising how even the smallest steps toward health can significantly change things.

Grace is a value in my life and yet, it's hard for me to extend it to my sweet husband sometimes. For years, I've kept quite the scorecard. I kept track of everything and tried to make it all even. It's exhausting. Every time I would see 1 Corinthians 13, I would roll my eyes at the impossibility of a love "that keeps no record of wrongs." I couldn't imagine that. But I see a therapist often because I want to be a more graceful and brave person who loves freely and doesn't keep score (in any of my relationships).

Dig deeper insert with questions

Closing Thought

It's risky to give yourself to someone else. It always will be. There are no guarantees, and there are lots of ways for it to fall apart and break your heart. *But the upside is infinite.* There is a mysterious, indescribable, complex exchange that can happen in the space between you, filling you with joy, confirming your intuition that marriage is not only good for you, but good for the world. Marriage has the uniquely powerful capacity to transform you both into more loving and generous and courageous and compassionate people. Marriage— gay and straight— is a gift to the world because the world needs more— not less— love, fidelity, commitment, devotion, and sacrifice (Bell).

Regardless of what kind of relationships you find yourself in, may you be willing to do the work to love well, deeply and from the best part of you. May you welcome God in to do the work of love because that is what love does. Amen!