

Fourth Sunday of the Year – January 31, 2016

There it is: St. Paul's famous sermon of love, our second reading. It's used so often at weddings. Besides having something beautiful to say to prospective brides and grooms, it also has something to say to those whose marriages have begun to wear thin on the edges. But let me do something today a little less soothing than anyone might expect. I propose to rescue Paul's words from their usual wedding context. Here's how.

First, pay attention to the context of Paul's words. Paul did not write these words as a wedding sermon. He wrote them to a church in conflict. Paul has received some bad news about the Corinthians. Rich members were shutting out poor members. Some folks were bragging about who was baptized by whom, building up jealous rivalries. Others were even boasting about their sinful behavior, saying that because they were free in Christ, they were free to do whatever they wished. This Church in Corinth, so full of promise, was being torn apart by factions, gossip, back-stabbing, back-sliding, and heaps of downright pettiness. So Paul launches into his famous hymn of love. No warm fuzzies here. Love, for St. Paul, looks like, sounds like, acts like, Jesus Christ. Love looks like the one who welcomed sinners and ate with them. Love sounds like the one who, in today's gospel, would not be domesticated even by his hometown friends and family. Love acts like the one who stood ready to sacrifice even his own life for those who could never deserve such a gift.

There is, after all, no such thing as "love" in the abstract. Love exists only when somebody is loving. Love is not in the feelings or in the glands, although these are important. Love can operate, often does operate, when feelings are fearful, timid, or sad. Love does come to the surface when life is hard and rounds of applause are nowhere to be found. That's why the Russian writer, Fyodor Dostoevsky, still has perhaps the best line on love: "love in action is a harsh and dreadful thing..." he wrote.

Well, we're a long way from glitzy, gooey feelings about love. Feelings are wonderful and necessary; they embellish love and we would be enormously poorer without them. But they should not be identified with the decision to love in season and out of season, to do what is best for the beloved, which is why, perhaps, parents drag their kids to the dentist.

A story about Mother Theresa of Calcutta provides a fitting closure to what St. Paul had in mind. A camera crew followed Mother on a typical day as she ranged among the poorest of the poor in the slums of Calcutta. At one point, the cameraman spoke out and said, "I wouldn't do what you're doing for a million bucks." "I wouldn't either," Mother said. "I wouldn't either."