

Creatio ex nihilo
1 Corinthians 13:1-13

I thought they were the perfect couple . . . young . . . good looking . . . they both had good careers . . . earning good money. They'd turned up at my church a couple of months previously and hadn't missed a Sunday. So, when they asked me to marry them, I was thrilled. I worked with them on pre-marriage preparation and they were connected and open . . . and clearly committed. Before the wedding day I took a call to a congregation interstate, but I honoured my commitment by flying back to conduct the wedding. What a day! The groom immaculate in his suit . . . the bride radiant in white. Family and friends beaming with joy. A reader stood up and announced the reading . . . it was 1 Corinthians 13. She began: "Love is patient . . . love is kind . . ." and the whole gathering gave a warm collective sigh. What beautiful words . . .

. . . many months later I heard that they went on their honeymoon came home and got divorced!

And, I'm sure that's not an uncommon occurrence. So much for those 'beautiful words'? Perhaps they would have been more fittingly spoken in front of the Family Court judge finalizing the divorce instead of as idealized statements at a wedding! *That* setting would, at least, be closer to their original context! Paul certainly didn't write them as idealized statements. He didn't write them as a wedding text. He wrote them to express reality . . . and it wasn't a pretty reality. When Paul wrote these words he wasn't thinking of a string quartet, he was thinking of a sledge hammer!

The church in Corinth . . . so full of amazingly gifted people . . . so full of energy and enthusiasm . . . so theologically and spiritually astute . . . and tearing itself apart with fighting and disagreement. And, what Paul is not-so-subtly pointing out to them is that, all those words . . . all those 'beautiful words' . . . they are everything the Corinthian church is not! They are not patient . . . they are not kind . . . they are envious and boastful and arrogant . . . they keep insisting on their own way . . . they are self-centred and opinionated and rude. Despite all their brilliance . . . despite all their giftedness . . . despite all their spirituality, they are nothing! Without love they are nothing.

Now, that's harsh! Nothing. Nobodies. Going nowhere. Paul's not pulling any punches!

Imagine belonging to a conflicted and divided church? Thank God the LCA isn't conflicted and divided! Thank God there are no issues with egos and personalities here at St John's! Thank God I never argue with my wife! Thank God all our relationships are healthy and successful . . . otherwise Paul's sledgehammer might be directed at us too!

Sadly, I don't think the Corinthian church was unique.

They were brilliant . . . they were talented . . . they had all the flashy spiritual gifts . . . they loved to show those gifts . . . because surely those gifts showed how godly they were . . . how tight they were with God . . . and, probably they could point to how much their church was growing . . . they were successful. But, Paul says: "You may be brilliant and talented and gifted . . . you've got so much going for you . . . but, what's going on in your hearts? That's the important question. What's happening there? Is this truly about others, or is it about you? Because if it's about you, then it's not love . . . and if it's not love, then ultimately it's nothing . . . because all those brilliant things . . . all you brilliant people . . .

that's all going to pass away . . . leaving what? Leaving nothing . . . unless there's love. Only love endures.

What the Corinthians did . . . and this is easy to do . . . what the Corinthians did was to confuse talent with character . . . as if one is indicative of the other. I think we do that all the time too . . . confuse talent for character. Just look at some of the tennis players at the recent Australian Open! But, those two things are not the same . . . I may be the most brilliant, the smartest, the strongest, the richest . . . but those things don't necessarily tell you about my *character* . . . they don't let on about what's happening in my heart.

But, perhaps you're thinking: "I'm not very talented . . . or flashy . . . and, what Lutheran church these days could boast of being successful?!"

Yes, we Lutherans are not prone to the flashier spiritual gifts . . . we're taught to be skeptical and cynical about them. We're more likely to be reserved . . . to work quietly in the background . . . just doing good things. But the same question applies to us too: "What's happening in your heart? When you do these good things . . . why are you doing them? Is there a little part of you that thinks: "Now I know I'm a good person" . . . or, "that must count for something" . . . or even, "Have I done enough?" In other words, is it really about others, or is it about you?

Paul reminds us: If I give away all my possessions . . . I could even sacrifice myself . . . my own body . . . I could be the most moral, fine, upstanding citizen, but if I don't have love, then I gain nothing . . . I earn nothing . . . all my goodness counts for nothing . . . before God.

You see, just as it's easy to mistake talent for character, it's also easy to mistake goodness for grace.

So, where does that leave us? When nothing we are, and nothing we do, puts us in a better position before God? Well, hopefully it leaves us back where we started . . . with those 'beautiful words'. "Love is patient . . . love is kind . . ." Paul is not speaking about an abstract concept . . . he's not idealizing love as we might do at a wedding . . . no, he's speaking to real people in a real situation . . . and when he speaks of love he is trying to personify love . . . because love is personal . . . it has to be. Love, in fact, is a person . . . with power . . . the power to change who we are . . . the power to change the way we behave.

I think we 'get that' . . . we understand love as a power . . . it's where our modern notion of romantic love actually helps us. If you've ever 'fallen in love' you've got an idea of what Paul means. 'Falling in love' is something that *happens* to you . . . you don't choose it . . . you can't make it happen . . . it literally overpowers you . . . and suddenly you are doing things you wouldn't normally do, and you're saying things you wouldn't normally say . . . and you just can't help it!

The love Paul is talking about is not 'a thing', or even a power we can conjure up within ourselves . . . it has to come from outside of us. In fact, as long as we see these 'beautiful words' as a guide for behaviour we won't have love. They aren't a moral guide, but a description . . . a description of a person . . . a particular person . . . the same person Paul has been banging on about in every word in his letter to the Corinthians . . . and in every other letter he writes . . . the person of Jesus . . . and particularly Jesus crucified on a Roman cross. For there . . . there on the cross we see the ultimate personification of

love: patient and kind, not insisting on his own way, not resentful or arrogant, rejoicing in the truth, bearing all things, trusting, enduring . . . even dying . . . not for his sake . . . not for God's sake, but purely and simply for our sake . . . for the sake of people . . . people who on their own amount to nothing . . . who are nothing but dust and ashes . . . but God's love is poured out in all its fullness by Jesus on the cross . . . a love that never ends . . . even death cannot stop it!

By ourselves . . . on our own . . . we are nothing . . . except that we are fully known by God . . . and fully loved by God. You and I have always been something to God . . . we have always been somebody . . . because God is love. And, in love, God creates out of our nothing . . . God creates new people . . . and fills us with love . . . so we can love . . . so we can be love personified.

How will we know when we're not mistaking talent for character and goodness for grace? Well, we won't, really . . . we can't . . . not in this life at least. Our motives are always mixed. But, what we can know is that we are known by God . . . what we can know is that love that endures comes not from within us, but as a gift from God . . . and so, we can only keep coming back to Jesus . . . trusting in his goodness . . . hoping in his grace . . . and as we do that love will flow. Those three things go together . . . faith, hope and love, but the greatest of them is love.

Amen.

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