



Warped Love

By Lt. Claire O'Brien-Hawk

Biblical Literacy & Discipleship Officer - California South Division

If I've heard it once, I've heard it a thousand times "love never fails." It's a great line.

But through the years, I've witnessed the struggle that comes from trying to enact this kind of love. Don't get me wrong, I think sometimes we need to struggle for things that are good. If you want to develop strength and endurance in your body, you must struggle through workouts. If you want to develop patience, you'll probably have to train for it through trying encounters. I don't think we should be opposed to struggle; struggles can help us grow.

But I have wondered - have we got it right when it comes to love? Should love be as painful and unnatural as it sometimes feels to be?

The line "love never fails" comes out of the classic passage from 1 Corinthians 13:4-8.

***Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud.
It does not dishonor others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of
wrongs.***

***Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth.
It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres.
Love never fails.***

Love is lauded as the greatest "of these." In its immediate context, this is a ranking between faith, hope, and love. But if you hop over to the chapter just before this one, you'll see Paul discussing all sorts of spiritual gifts, including: wisdom, knowledge, faith, healing, miraculous powers, prophecy, discernment, speaking in tongues, interpreting tongues, and teaching.

There are a lot of incredible things listed there. If love tops and binds them all together, it must be a pretty big deal. If we're going to be all that we should be as followers of Jesus, we must nail this one. Love seems pretty basic. Elementary! But if that's the case, why do so many things that happen in the name of love seem out of keeping with the goodness God has for us? I've seen people stay in destructive relationships, having their humanity whittled down; I've seen people burn out through their determination to love the unlovable single-handedly; I've seen people excuse themselves from apologizing and doing better, with the excuse "my heart was right"; I've seen relationships fail to grow and become all they're meant to be because "love" came to mean "let it be;" and I've seen people who have excelled in doing the right thing but whose hearts have grown cold - they've become people of the law rather than people of love.

Love is important. We need to run at it hard. But we can get lost if we run too hard in the wrong direction; we can get injuries if we work out too intensely with bad form. Love is awesome, but I don't think it means as much or as little as we have sometimes made it.

4 Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud.

5 It does not dishonor others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs.

6 Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth.

7 It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres.

8 Love never fails. 1 Corinthians 13:4-8

Questions for discussion:

1. When we talk about love, what kind of relationships come to mind?
2. Is there a limit to how patient you should be in loving someone who's acting terribly? What kind of things might change your answer? (Age? Circumstance? Relationship?)
3. How do you balance self-respect with not being self-seeking?
4. What does it mean to you not to keep a record of wrongs, to always protect, always trust, and always hope? Is that safe?
5. Have you ever chased down hard truths -either in yourself, or with someone else? What was the result?
6. How do you reconcile the verse "love never fails" with the plenty of times we see love apparently failing?

In these next sections, read as many of the verses as you can and think about/discuss how their message should inform our understanding of love - or more specifically, the ways they might speak truth to the ways we've misunderstood love. Sample questions are included, but free-wheelin' discussion is encouraged!

A. God's Thing

Genesis 2:7

Matthew 23:23-24

John 15:4-5

Acts 17:24-28

1 John 4:7-21

1. Have you ever run dry when loving and serving others? Why do you think that happened?
2. When you are doing well, spiritually, what kind of impact does that have on your relationships with others? How about when you are not doing so well?
3. What do you make of people who do good things, but don't believe in God? Where is their energy and motivation sourced? How is it different when we are in relationship with God? Is it? What does the Bible say about this connection between love and God?
4. Have you ever experienced someone who seems to have started off well with loving intentions, but something appears to have gone off track? What's that about? Have you found yourself in a situation where your first passion for loving and helping others became formulaic, or filled with resentment -or the good works seemed to become detached from the love which once inspired them? How might we recapture the flame in these instances?

B. Community

Exodus 18:5-26

Matthew 18:15-17

Luke 5:17-20

Acts 2:44-47

Acts 6:1-7

Romans 12:5-21

1 Corinthians 12:25-27

Galatians 6:2

1 Thessalonians 5:14

Hebrews 10:24-25

1 Peter 4:8-10

1. What do these verses bring to our understanding about who carries the burden/privilege/responsibility of love?
2. Have you ever burned out on loving a difficult person? Was there community support, or was it a solo enterprise?
3. What is an individual's responsibility to love when a relationship has become unhealthy or unsafe? How could the Church step in, so that love continues, without endangering or otherwise doing harm to individuals?

4. Have you ever sat on the sidelines because it looked like someone else had it covered when it came to befriending or loving someone who was unpopular?

5. What pictures, words, or feelings come to mind when we conceive of love as a whole-community Church project as opposed to the sole responsibility of the individual, on their own?

C. Honest work

Psalm 34:14

Psalm 51

Psalm 139:23-24

Proverbs 1:1-5

Proverbs 14:9

Proverbs 14:12

Proverbs 15:32

Proverbs 16:2

Matthew 5:23-24

Matthew 7:21-23

Matthew 25:31-46

Romans 12:18

Romans 14:19

2 Corinthians 7:9-11

Ephesians 4:1-16

Hebrews 12:10-11

Hebrews 12:14

James 1:22-23

1 Peter 1:13-16

2 Peter 1:5-8

1 John 1:9

1 John 3:18

1. Has anyone ever tried to excuse their unloving behavior toward you by saying they meant it well? What did that do for your relationship?

2. What kind of reflective practices might we engage in to check on how we're doing at loving others? What's something you need to address in yourself right now so that you can love better?

3. Can we love people "as they are" without calling them to the highest places within themselves?

4. What are some of the ways that you've been loved best? Who are the people in your life that love you best? What are those relationships like?

5. Have you ever had an honest (and loving) conversation with someone about how something they did was hurtful? How did it improve the relationship? If it didn't, why do you think that is?

6. Have you been in a relationship where problems weren't addressed? What are those relationships like?

Love never fails. But where there are prophecies, they will cease; where there are tongues, they will be stilled; where there is knowledge, it will pass away ... And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love.

1 Corinthians 13:8, 13