

**Learning to Love
I Corinthians 13:1-13**

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In our continuing move to be of service to you, we bring you this important reminder. This is February 12. I know that this is Super Bowl Sunday, but don't be lulled to sleep. There are only 2 more days before Valentine's Day. You've waited too long already, so don't wait till the last minute. Get out there and get those cards and candy now!

No, wait until after the service.

You see, (and here I may be a little bit confessional) many times we wait until the last minute. We rush out to the grocery store at 10:45 on February 13 and wonder why there aren't any cards. Of course it is easier when there are only 3 cards left. *"What do you mean; all you have left is a card for a great grandmother?"* And many times it is precisely our desire to avoid having to make that choice that keeps us away until we have to go. So this morning I want to help you at least narrow your choices.

You can go with the funny card—like this one: *"Valentine, You give me that Loving feeling...of course sometimes you give me that "I want to kick you in the butt" feeling, but let's not dwell on that!"*

Or perhaps the cute card is more your style—you really can't go wrong with Snoopy and birds—*"Happy Valentine's Day to someone who's sweet, precious, enjoyable, charming, wonderful, adorable, loving. Actually you're better than that, but I ran out of birds."*

Or the sentimental one that is so sweet that you almost need to call your dentist as you go through the check-out line. *"You stepped out of my dreams and into my life, turning all that I had ever hoped for into reality..."*

You stepped out of my dreams and found a way to touch my heart like it's never been touched before...

You stepped out of my dreams and showed me love the way it was meant to be...and now I know that you, and you alone, are the love of my life...my dream came true."

Of course there is always the sexy card! *"Let's get naked and watch a baseball game! Hey, There's no baseball in February. And there we are, naked with nothing to do...hmmm"*

See, there are all sorts of cards that you can choose. But choose one! Today. Because come Tuesday you will need to tell that special someone that they are loved. And nothing says love like a \$2.50 card!

At least that is what we have been led to believe. Of course, that goes along with our mythic view of love. You know the scene. We have seen it so many times in the movies—boy meets girl, through many funny/tragic events they fall in love, overcome obstacles and finally drive off into a blissful sunset. Wonderful, romantic, and so not true! It is part of the myths we have about love.

Thomas Merton wrote about the strange way that we talk about “falling in love.” He said,

“We speak of falling in love as though love were something like water that collects in pools, lakes, rivers and oceans. You can “fall” into it or just walk around it... Our expression suggests an unforeseen mishap...you are at a party; you have had more drinks than you need. You decide to walk around the garden a while. You don’t notice the swimming pool...all at once you have to swim. Fortunately they fish you out and you are wet but none worse for the wear.”

But then he reminds us, *“Sometimes the pool is empty. Then you don’t get wet, you just rack your skull or break your arm.”*¹ To talk about falling in love is to say that love is an accident. It just happens!

That is one of the myths we have about love. There is the myth that says that somewhere in the world there is that one person that is just perfect for me. If I can just meet him or her, then I will be in love, and they will love me and all will be well with the world. What a fatalistic view of life! I know about that. It is what I was told when I was growing up. It goes along with the idea that God has our lives all mapped out and that sometime in life I will meet that person.

But what if the person that is perfect for me doesn’t realize it and marries someone else? Or what if they are hit by a truck or their parents move to be agriculturalists in China? What happens to me?

Again, this goes with the idea that love is just fate. I don’t have any responsibility; don’t blame me if things don’t work out—you aren’t the right person, there was someone else I should have married. It just happens!

And then there is the myth that says that love is the way I feel when I see you. Some of you are still young enough to remember that feeling; you know, the *“when-I-see-you-I-get-all-squishy-inside-feeling-and-want-to-throw-up-just-to-show-how-much-I-care”* feeling!

And then we get married and settle down and buy a house and have a kid and then we wake up one morning and *“Whoa! I’ve lost that loving feeling!”* How can you feel loving when there are children running around the house in the middle of the night, and you have a big presentation tomorrow and the car needs the oil changed and the washing machine is on the blink and your spouse has a really bad case of morning breath? There are times when I don’t feel loving. Life just sucks it out of us.

So where are we? If love is not an accident, if it isn’t fate, if it isn’t a feeling, what is it? Whenever you ask that question, especially in church, you hear our scripture lesson for this morning. We know this passage. Even if someone is not “religious” they know this passage. When I meet with couples who are planning their wedding, even if they have not been to church since their roommate from college got married, even if they have trouble with John 3:16 except at football games, they know this passage. *“Love is patient and kind; love is not jealous or boastful; it is not arrogant or rude. Love does not insist on its own way; it is*

¹ Thomas Merton. *Loving and Living*. (Bantam Books:New York, 1979), pg 23.

not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice at wrong, but rejoices in the right. Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never ends. So faith, hope, love abide, these three; but the greatest of these is love."

We like those words. I like those words. But they are very different from the romantic view that we are usually fed. If you read through them, they are not touchy-feely.

Scott Peck, the psychiatrist/minister, picking up on Paul's words defined love this way. *"Love is the will to extend one's self for the purpose of nurturing one's own, or another's spiritual growth."*² Love is not an accident. It is not a feeling. It is an act of will. It is something that we do. It is something we choose to do. And like anything else, it is not something that we just know.

Oh, now I know how to ride a bicycle. I can go out right now and jump on a bike and ride away, but I still have on my knee the scar of those early days. It took a lot of rides through our yard before I could ride without training wheels, without my father holding on to the seat. Riding a bike was something I had to learn.

It is the same with love. It is something we have to learn to do. It is not one of those things that comes naturally. Go down and look in the nursery this morning. The babies are as cute as they can be, but they really can't love. They eat, wet, sleep and slobber. They live in their own little world. That is our natural state. We want to live in our world, take care of us. It takes a real effort to move beyond that to care for others.

And be aware, moving beyond ourselves is risky. It means that you may get hurt—no, it means that you will be hurt. C. S. Lewis warned us when he wrote:

*To love at all is to be vulnerable. Love anything, and your heart will certainly be wrung and possibly be broken. If you want to make sure of keeping it intact, you must give your heart to no one, not even to an animal. Wrap it carefully round with hobbies and little luxuries; avoid all entanglements; lock it up safe in the casket or coffin or your selfishness. But in that casket--safe, dark, motionless, airless--it will change. It will not be broken; it will become unbreakable, impenetrable, irredeemable...The only place outside Heaven where you can be perfectly safe from all the dangers...of love is Hell.*³

When we love, there is the chance that we will be hurt. Just like riding a bike, walking, driving a car, swimming, doing all the things that make life, life. And the only way we learn to love is to practice—to watch others, to learn from their example, to model ourselves after them.

Dave Simmons tells the story of taking his children to a shopping mall near their home. As they drove up, a big sign read, "Petting Zoo." The kids jumped up in a rush and asked, "Daddy, Daddy. Can we go? Please. Please. Can we go?"

² M. Scott Peck. *The Road Less Traveled*. (Simon and Schuster:New York, 1978) pg 81.

³ C.S. Lewis, *The Four Loves*, (Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., 1960), p.169.

Now this petting zoo was a great place for the kids to stay, fenced in with all sorts of furry creatures, safe and secure (children and pets) while mom and dad shopped. "Sure," he said, flipping them both a quarter before walking into Sears.

A few minutes later though, he turned around and saw his daughter walking along behind him, surprised that she preferred the hardware department to the petting zoo. But that was not the case. He asked her what was wrong.

She looked up at him with those giant limpid brown eyes and said sadly, "Well, Daddy, it cost fifty cents. So, I gave Brandon my quarter." Then she said the most beautiful thing I ever heard. She repeated their family motto. The family motto is in "Love is Action!"

She had given her brother her quarter, and no one loves cuddly furry creatures more than Helen. She had done it because she had seen it played out. She had watched her mother give her father the last piece of steak and say, "Love is Action!" She had watched her parents do and say "Love is Action!" for years around the house. She had heard and seen "Love is Action," and now she had incorporated it into her little lifestyle. It had become part of her.

He goes on to tell the rest of the story. He writes

"As soon as I finished my errands, I took Helen to the petting zoo. We stood by the fence and watched Brandon go crazy petting and feeding the animals. Helen stood with her hands and chin resting on the fence and just watched Brandon. I had fifty cents burning a hole in my pocket; I never offered it to Helen, and she never asked for it.

Because she knew the whole family motto. It's not "Love is Action." It's "Love is SACRIFICIAL Action!" Love always pays a price. Love always costs something. Love is expensive. When you love, benefits accrue to another's account. Love is for you, not for me. Love gives; it doesn't grab. Helen gave her quarter to Brandon and wanted to follow through with her lesson. She knew she had to taste the sacrifice. She wanted to experience that total family motto. Love is sacrificial action.⁴

You see, love costs. It always has.

Just ask God.

⁴ Dave Simmons., *Dad, The Family Coach*, (Victor Books, 1991), pp. 123-124.