

An Ever-fixed Mark

I Corinthians 13

Text:

*And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three;
and the greatest of these is love.*

—I Corinthians 13:13

Introduction

In a well-adjusted American family I suspect there is an equal distribution of love and affection among all the family members. Apparently in my immediate family there is an exception. The distribution of love there is weighted heavily in favor of the rabbit. Nearly ten years ago we acquired a new family member in the form of a Norwegian dwarf rabbit: three and one-half pounds in total weight. We call him Fiver, named after the little clairvoyant rabbit in *Watership Down*. When our two children lived at home, each of us stroked Fiver, cuddled him, babied him, petted him, held him, brushed him, fed him, and confided our deepest secrets to him when no one else was around. To this very day, he has the run of the house twice daily, dashes about the living room and study as if chased by ghosts, and does helicopter spins in the air. He is certainly a bona fide member of our family and, believe me! he has had more love in the last ten years than the rest of us could possibly ever hope to experience in our lifetime.

When is Human Love Not Enough?

A couple of months ago, while watching Fiver in his cage, I was struck by a rather poignant question: *When is human love not enough?* It occurred to me that in spite of all the love and affection the four of us give him, Fiver might simply want another bunny with whom to snuggle and talk about the meaning of life. When I mentioned this to my wife, she readily pointed out that Fiver is on the other end of the food chain and probably doesn't deal with such ponderous issues as meaning and purpose of existence; indeed, he probably doesn't experience any existential dread and furthermore may have little or no interest in discussing these matters with another rabbit – male or female – or with anybody else for that matter. Of course, I saw through her argument right away and informed her that this was simply her rationale to keep Fiver all to herself and never have to share him with another rabbit.

Ultimately I had to give Beth the benefit of the doubt and acknowledge the truth in what she contended. Yet I hold to the original question and still subscribe to its validity: *When is human love not enough?*

For us, at this end of the food chain, it stands as a crucial question. When is human love not enough for you or for me? When is human love not enough for our neighborhood, our community, our nation, or our world?

The Superior, Abiding Quality

In our scripture reading for today, the Apostle Paul comes across as unequivocally counter-cultural. He both advocates and perpetuates the radical gospel of love instituted and inaugurated by Jesus of Nazareth. This gospel of love stands in stark contrast to a cultural context in which hatred, violence, persecution, oppression, bullyism, arrogance, and self-aggrandizement composed the common fabric of the day. Unmistakably asserted in this 'love-hymn' is Paul's description of the *superior and critical demands of love.*"ⁱ The apostle adopted an unpopular theological posture that was antithetical to the values of many people in the church of Corinth. Love is superior, he insisted, to what you highly regard as speaking in tongues. Love is superior to what you revere as prophecy. Love is superior to your vastly venerated knowledge. Love is superior even to the faith you possess and cherish. In point of fact, according to Paul, of all the gifts of the Spirit, there are only three with abiding qualities that *have a firm purchase on eternal truths: faith, hope, and love, and the greatest of these is love.*"ⁱⁱ Without love—this radical quality of Christian being—all other gifts of the Spirit are *noisy gongs or clanging cymbals*, reverberating echoes of emptiness in a cavernous cave of cacophony. No equivocation here! Paul is direct, candid and poignant with the Corinthians because the Christians at the Church of Corinth—awash in controversy, twisted with personal self-interest, saturated with self-righteousness—couldn't seem to get it right. This thing called *love* was so enigmatic and elusive.

There is a contemporaneity—or a current quality—about this 'love-hymn' of Paul's. Its poignancy seems relevant to our generation as well since, admittedly, there are times when we can't seem to get it right . . . can't get it right at the source, at the very heart of the matter. Love: so enigmatic, so elusive.

A Disquieting Dialogue

One of the most profound, nagging, and disquieting dialogues in all of literature occurs in D. H. Lawrence's novel *Women in Love*. The scene is set by a large mill-pond, where Rupert Birkin is working on the bank of the pond, sawing and hammering. Ursula Brangwen had not seen him for quite some time. He had been ill and now was *very thin and hollow, with a ghastly look in his face*. A few moments into the conversation Ursula observed:

Ursula: *You have been ill, haven't you?*

Birkin: *Yes.*

Ursula: *Has it made you frightened?*

Birkin: *What of?*

Ursula: *It is frightening to be very ill, isn't it?*

Birkin: *It isn't pleasant. Whether one is really afraid of death or not, I have never decided. In one mood, not a bit, in another, very much.*

Ursula: *But doesn't it make you feel ashamed? I think it makes one so ashamed, to be ill—illness is so terribly humiliating, don't you think?*

Birkin: *May-be. Though one knows all the time one's life isn't really right, at the source. That's the humiliation. I don't see that the illness counts so much, after that. One is ill because one doesn't live properly—can't. It's the failure to live that makes one ill, and humiliates one.*

Ursula: *But do you fail to live?*

Birkin: *Why, yes—I don't make much success of my days. . . .it infuriates me that I can't get (it) right, at the really growing part of me. I feel all tangled and messed up, and I can't get straight anyhow. I don't know what really to do. One must do something somewhere.*

Ursula: *Why should you always be doing? It is so plebeian.*

*I think it is much better to be really patrician, and to do
nothing but just be oneself, like a walking flower.*

Birkin: *I quite agree, if one has burst into blossom. But I
can't get my flower to blossom anyhow. . . . I'm not
right . . . my only rightness lies in the fact that I know it.
I detest what I am, outwardly. I loathe myself as a
human being. Humanity is a huge aggregate lie . . .
humanity is a tree of lies. And they say that love is the
greatest thing; they persist in saying this, the foul liars,
and just look at what they do! Look at all the millions
of people who repeat every minute that love is the
greatest, and charity is the greatest—and see what they
are doing all the time. By their works ye shall know
them, for the dirty liars and cowards, who daren't stand
by their own actions, much less their own words. . . . if
what they say were true, then they couldn't help
fulfilling it . . . if what we want is hate, let us have at
it—death, murder, torture, violent destruction—let us
have it; but not in the name of love.* ⁱⁱⁱ

Let me put the question to you directly! When Paul claims that the greatest of these is love, is he lying to us? Is love merely a contrived illusion that assists us in coping with the muck we wade through every day. Is love simply a romanticized defense mechanism shaped into an ideal far beyond our reach, an anodyne fantasy that helps us

cope with bad marriages, a spate of unemployment or a miserable job and a lousy supervisor, financial disaster and a plummeting market, perpetually poor self-esteem, interminable self-devouring anger or crippling resentment, the aggravating aging process, an all-consuming doubt or fear of death, a terminal illness?

The greatest of these is love, but is love an illusion? Is love a disguise designed to console us when we have made a pretty mess of life? Is love after all only a disguise for despair, disillusionment, degradation, dejection, a disgusting diminuendo into an ultimate eternal silence? Human love: so enigmatic, so elusive, so insufficient, so misunderstood, so mistaken!

For Rupert Birkin, it is the failure to live that makes one ill, and humiliates one. Given the full context of his dialogue with Ursula Branwen, it is the failure to live *with authentic love* that makes one ill, that humiliates him.

I'll buy that. I quite agree.

Often I have loved intently, but seldom have I loved well.

Often I have loved passionately, but seldom have I loved well.

Often I have loved many, but seldom have I loved many well.

Often I have loved humanity, but seldom have I loved humanity well. Often I have loved rhetorically, but seldom have I loved sacrificially.

Often I have loved poetically, but seldom have I loved authentically.

Don't ask me for specifics, but my human love has not always been kind. Don't ask me time and place, but my human love has not always been patient. Don't ask me when or where, but my human love at times has been arrogant and rude, has been irritable and resentful, insisting on my own way. Don't ask me which relationships, but at times my human love rejoiced in another's wrong and failed to rejoice in another's right. In point of fact, my human love has never been enough.

Has human love been enough for you, or has it always been—at least in part— alloyed: self-serving, self-centered, self-aggrandizing? . . . and never enough?

On the initial reading of this ‘love-hymn,’ it may appear that what Paul is encouraging the Corinthians to do is to create and cultivate their own human love for one another. But not so! Paul here, in no uncertain terms, is calling for their authentic imitation of transcending love, of the divine love that resides with them in the spirit of Jesus Christ: God in their midst.

Love That Never Ends

The apostle is calling for the Corinthians to get it right at the source, to get it right at the growing part of them. The apostle is calling for them to reflect a transcending love that lifts them up above the controversy and above their self-righteousness, a transcending love that *bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things*, a transcending love that *looks on tempests and is never shaken*,^{iv} a transcending love that reflects the love of Christ that never ends. By the same token, the apostle Paul is calling for us to recognize that it is our failure to live with an authentic, transcending love that makes us ill, that humiliates us, that twists and distorts our culture into a hideous manifestation of violence and destruction.

According to legend, Thomas Moore, the renowned Irish poet of the nineteenth century, returned from an extended business trip only to discover the family doctor leaving his house. As they met on the front porch, the physician sadly reported to Moore that his beautiful young wife had contracted small pox, and her face was pitifully scarred from the disease. Moore left the doctor and ascended the stairs to their bedroom, encased in darkness. He approached the curtains to pull the drapes aside, when his wife stopped him with an insistent “No, Thomas. Never look on this hideous face ever again.”

Moore returned to the living room, sat at the pianoforte and composed a song. When finished he ascended the stairs a second time, drew back the drapes, approached the bed, and sang to his wife:

Believe me, if all those endearing young charms

Which I gaze on so fondly today,

Were to change by tomorrow and fleet in my arms,

Like fairy gifts fading away,

*Thou would'st still be adored as this moment thou art,
Let thy loveliness fade as it will,
And around the dear ruin each wish of my heart
Would entwine itself verdantly still.^v*

There are times when human love is not. We are ever challenged to look beneath the veneer of common life, and with the eyes of a transcending love to see *that deep inside everyone we meet, in everyone we know, there is something valuable, worth listening to, worthy of our trust, and sacred to our touch.*^{vi}

Conclusion

*Let me not to the marriage of true minds
Admit impediments. Love is not love
Which alters when it alteration finds
Or bends with the remover to remove.
O, no! it is an ever-fixèd mark
That looks on tempests and is never shaken . . .^{vii}*

Would that I—in the months we have left together—would that I could love you authentically with a transcending love like that!

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Notes

ⁱ Phrase from the *Oxford Bible Commentary*, I Corinthians, John Barclay, p. 1128

ⁱⁱ Ibid.

ⁱⁱⁱ D.H. Lawrence, *Women in Love*, pp. 117-119

^{iv} Line from Shakespeare's *Sonnet 116*

^v Thomas Moore, *Believe Me, If All Those Endearing Young Charms*, stanza 1, from *Irish Melodies* [1807-1834]

^{vi} From McMahan and Campbell, *Please Touch*: "We do not come to believe in ourselves

until someone reveals that deep inside us something is valuable, worth listening to, worthy

of our trust, and sacred to our touch."

^{vii} William Shakespeare, *Sonnet 116*, lines 1-6