

Loved Into Being

1 Cor. 13:1-12

Today's passage is about love. There are so many scriptures about love—love is the central idea in the Christian scripture. But let's hear a word on love from Paul's letter to the Corinthians.

If I speak in the tongues of humans and of angels but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. ² And if I have prophetic powers and understand all mysteries and all knowledge and if I have all faith so as to remove mountains but do not have love, I am nothing. ³ If I give away all my possessions and if I hand over my body so that I may boast^[a] but do not have love, I gain nothing.

⁴ Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant⁵ or rude. Love does not insist on its own way; love is not irritable; love keeps no record of wrongs; ⁶ love does not rejoice in wrongdoing but rejoices in the truth. ⁷ Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

⁸ Love never ends. But as for prophecies, they will come to an end; as for tongues, they will cease; as for knowledge, it will come to an end. ⁹ For we know only in part, and we prophesy only in part, ¹⁰ but when the complete comes, the partial will come to an end. ¹¹ When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became an adult, I put an end to childish ways. ¹² For now we see only a reflection, as in a mirror, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known. ¹³ And now faith, hope, and love remain, these three, and the greatest of these is love.

Love is the heart of reality.

That's a bit of a controversial statement. Not everyone agrees. Some say reality is matter, atoms, physical properties, laws. But when I look at the world and try my best peer into the heart of things—not just what the world is made of—but the *reason we are here...* I see love.

Some see no reason for any of this, no method to the madness. They see the texture: the beauty and joy and suffering and death but many throw up their hands saying “there's no pattern, no cause, no direction to this existence.” I respect that perspective.

But for you who agree to the name “Christian,” when we see into the heart of the world, into the essence of things, we are invited to see love. God is love. Love, we believe, is the cause of all of this. In the beginning, God loved the world into its creation, God made it good. We believe that God made a covenant with humankind in love, a promise to be with us and for us and we believe God has kept that promise. We believe with John that God so loved us that divinity became humanity; God came to walk with us, to show us in the flesh our created goodness, God came as Jesus to save us when we had lost our way. God suffers with us, for a love that will not suffer is not love. But nor is love overcome by suffering or by death. We Christians believe that the future, too is ultimately to be shaped by love—we give the name heaven to that time in the future when the fullness of God's love will be revealed, when God will be at home with us, when justice and peace will embrace, and all flesh will dwell in love and freedom.

Love is the heart of reality. And love, for a follower of Jesus, is how you and I are invited to experience the present moment. “Love one another, as I have loved you,” Jesus says. “Love your neighbor.” “Love your enemies.”

Paul reprises the theme in his meditation. You can be a smooth talker, you can see the future, or have deep faith, or be so selfless that you give everything away... but if you don't have love, none of that matters. Love is powerful, Paul says. But it's not the kind of power that overwhelms and conquers. It's power that bears, believes, hopes and endures. Love never ends. Love is the closest thing we have to truth—there's no such thing as being "right" unless you're also loving.

Paul says one more thing about love in this passage. It's toward the end, when this passage begins to sound a bit like a riddle. He says:

For we know only in part, and we prophesy only in part... ¹²For now we see only a reflection, as in a mirror, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known.

If you puzzle over these lines, it's OK. As I understand them, Paul is talking about how, for all our talk about love's greatness and love's supremacy, love never seems like it's quite enough. We know we're supposed to think that love is this great and powerful thing, but in the moment, so often love feels weak. It doesn't immediately disarm the bully. It doesn't prevent sickness or death. It doesn't immediately heal the sadness. Paul, I believe, is saying there's a bit of an existential wager we place on love. Love will win in the end. Love will right the wrongs. Love will find a way to draw the wayward back. Love will heal the wounds. We will see that day, in the future, Paul says. Our faith in love will be vindicated. But the way we will know it, the way the ultimate power of love will be confirmed for us, is that you will one day know yourself as fully loved. You will meet God, face to face. And God will say, "you is my Beloved."

That is how love works. It's one of love's mysteries. We are capable of love because we are loved first. We love someone else because someone has loved us.

Love is the heart of reality. But we cannot "get it." We cannot "do it." Love must be given to us. There's a maddening passivity to it, for those of us who pride ourselves on being "doers." To know love, to be capable of love, we have to be able to sit still and receive it.

Many of us struggle with love. When we see someone who "gets it" it's a marvel—almost a miracle. Over the last few years, there's been a renewed appreciation for one of the great modern "apostles" of love, Fred Rogers—known to most as "Mr. Rogers." Thanks to a spate of recent movies, many of us have been reminded of his loving presence on our childhood television screens. It wasn't too long ago that Rogers was the butt of jokes. With his slow, syrupy speech, his goofy child-like mannerisms, and his cardigan sweaters, Fred Rogers was the antithesis of modern cool. In a world where most of us choose to be cynical so that we aren't disappointed by people, Fred Rogers' nerdy, sincere belief in human goodness was an easy target.

That began to change when Tom Junod wrote a piece in the late 90s in *Esquire* about American heroes. Junod had a reputation as a journalist who was skilled at take-downs of famous people. He said "I was assigned the story about Fred because one of the editors at *Esquire* thought it would be amusing to have me, with my stated determination to "say the unsayable," write about the nicest man in the world." Junod assumed going into the interview that there was something "behind" the man. He assumed that there was a "Mr. Rogers" that stood in front of the camera, but that there was a "real" Fred Rogers that got angry or had a cynicism or didn't really like kids. Without giving away the article, which is available online, Junod was wrong.

What Junod found in Fred Rogers, was a man who was deeply thoughtful, deeply reflective, deeply religious, and deeply loving. The two men developed a friendship. They corresponded almost a hundred times. Junod is clear that Fred Rogers saved him. Junod wrote, "Fred Rogers was a man of resourceful and relentless kindness who saw something in me that I didn't see in myself. He trusted me when I thought I was untrustworthy, and took an interest in me that went beyond my initial interest in him."

For Fred Rogers, reality always came back to love. "He wanted us to remember what it was like to be a child... believing that if you remembered what it was like to be a child, you would remember that you were a child of God." And if you are a child of God, you are beloved. And if you are beloved, you are capable of loving others.

Late in his career, Fred Rogers was given a lifetime Emmy award. And he appeared to receive it. It's one of these award shows when the stars have come out, a night when people have spent an ungodly amount of money on clothes, hair and make-up. When people receive awards and they thank people, but you get the impression that they just want to be seen thanking people. Then Fred Rogers gets up. What he does is classic....

"You are here because someone loved you into being." "Those who have cared about you and wanted what is best for you in life." He's right.

- We are loved when we are conceived.
- We are loved by the woman who holds us in her arms, who alters her life to nourish and protect us.
- We are loved by the one who held us in their arms. By the one who spoke to us and sang to us. By the one who introduced us to this marvelous world full of wonder.
- We are loved by the one who keep us safe. By the one who taught us and helped us discover our gifts.
- We are loved by our life partners...
- We are loved by our children, who give back what we give them
- We are loved into being by strangers, who love us in ways we will never fully know...

We are loved into being. This is not just a biological story; it is a theological story. Love is the heart of reality.

I know it's sometimes hard to see. We do wonder if love is strong enough. Tom Junod wrote a beautiful essay in 2019 in the Atlantic which is also worth reading. He wrote about all the attention that Fred Rogers had received. And he was grateful for it. But Junod was also sad. He believe Fred Rogers had "lost." In his mission to show the world radical kindness, to get people to believe in goodness, Junod said that Rogers had failed. Media—especially social media—has shown us to ourselves, and we are not a good as Fred believed we were. We remember him, but we're not convinced that we're capable of the things Fred stood for.

I don't think Junod's right about that. It's true, love doesn't always seem like it's on the ascent. It sometimes feels quite weak. But it is, in the end, the one thing we can trust in. It is the heart of all reality. Everything is loved into being. Love bears, believes, hopes, endures all things.

¹² ... now we see love's power only a reflection, as in a mirror, but one day we will see face to face. Now we know love only in part; then we will know fully, even as we are fully known. ¹³ And now faith, hope, and love remain, these three, and the greatest of these is love.