



"What Love Can't Do"

1 Corinthians 13

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A little over a year ago, my friends Kristin and David were married. It will shock you, I am sure, to know that the reading they selected was the one we just heard, some of our most well-worn, highly-regarded words about love. The ceremony was very small, and held in an even smaller room, and so they asked if a variety of friends could share in the reading, speaking aloud from wherever they happened to be sitting. The idea, they said, was that they would be literally surrounded by these words as they began their life together, which I thought was a wonderfully beautiful sentiment, and I told them that. What they did not tell me, and what they themselves did not know, was that those friends were preparing an alternate sort of reading. It included all of the words Paul intended.

But it went like this:

Love is patient. *Except when it's not.*

Love is kind. *But not always. Sometimes even love gets real mad.*

Love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. *Except when it must be.*

Love does not insist on its own way. *Are you kidding me? Have you ever met love? Love is not always so good at compromise.*

It is not irritable or resentful. *Unless it's coming from someone who really has asked you 14 times to pick up your dirty socks.*

Love does not rejoice in wrongdoing; it rejoices in the truth. *But love will usually tell you when you were wrong and it was right.*

Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. *And endurance can be really underrated. Seriously underrated.*

Love never ends. *Here's the real truth, because sometimes love is a pain in the rear.** (*They used a different word there.) *Sometimes love is a pain in the rear, but love, real love, keeps showing up.*

And therein ended the reading. The Word of the Lord... more or less. Love is patient. Except when it's not. Love is kind. But sometimes love gets real mad.

I will tell you, I have never laughed so hard during a wedding. But I am tempted to say I've never heard quite so much truth during a wedding, either. You see, David and Kristin, at the time of their marriage, were both in their late 40s. And in their own ways, they had each seen and experienced enough to know that love is not all rainbows and puppy dogs and walks on the beach.

They had seen and experienced enough to know that sometimes, we can be disappointed by love.

You know what that's like, don't you?

Of course you do. In all sorts of different ways, I know you do.

We also know what that is like as a nation. The last time I stood in this pulpit, a month ago, was in the aftermath of the shooting in El Paso that left 22 dead and 24 injured. And today I stand here in the aftermath of the shooting in Odessa, that left 5 dead and 21 injured, including a 14-month-old little girl.

I imagine that some of you might be thinking right now, even in a sermon on love, we're still talking about guns.

But sometimes it seems — it seems — that love just isn't enough to fix everything that has gone so horribly, terribly wrong. In our own lives and in our collective life.

The words of Psalm 13, "How long, O Lord? Will you forget us forever"¹ for me, those words are losing the genuine drama they were always intended to carry, and I know good and well that are many, many, many in this world who have been voicing this lament in ways far deeper, and for a time far longer, than me.

I have thought about John the Baptist a good amount in these days. John the Baptist, prophet who heralded the coming of Christ, long-haired, honey-eating man who kicked off Jesus' recruiting tour and told everyone to pay attention.

For all of his efforts, John is thrown in prison. The gospel of Matthew tells it this way: "When John heard in prison what the Messiah was doing, he sent word by his disciples and said to him, 'Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?'"²

How long, O Lord? Will you forget us forever?

His words are some of the saddest in all of scripture, I think. "Are you the one we've been waiting for? Are you the one who will save

us? Or have we gotten it all wrong? Are you the one... or aren't you...because right now... I can't tell. Right now, the darkness is so deep, I'm just not sure anymore. Right now, I keep hearing about thoughts and prayers, but here I am still behind bars, still shackled in chains. So tell me, honestly, Jesus, are you the one?"

My friend Matt, who is also a pastor, he told his father that he loved him.³ He was leaving his father at the hospital, for acute inpatient psychiatric care. His dad was consumed by clinical depression. Matt says it this way, he says that when depression descended, his charismatic father disappeared without leaving. As the nurses took his shoelaces and his belt, Matt told his father that he loved him.

And he did. And he thought, at the time, that surely, if his dad could remember how much he was loved, he wouldn't be so sad anymore.

He thought, at the time, that if his dad could remember how much he was loved, it would fix things. All of this happened on the day after Matt's 16th birthday. As he grew older, he says, he learned more about love. He learned something important about love. Love can't fix depression because clinical depression is not the result of a lack of love. It is the result of a chemical imbalance in the brain. Love couldn't fix his dad, because love doesn't have the power to fix everything.

I know. It's a beautiful summer day outside, it's a holiday weekend for Pete's sake, and here I am listing of all the things love hasn't been able to do, reminding you of all the circumstances love hasn't been able to change, lamenting all of the brokenness love hasn't been able to fix.

¹ Psalm 13:1

² Matthew 11:2-6

³ Rev. Matt Gaventa, senior pastor of University Presbyterian Church in Austin, Texas. He is a real-life

friend, but also shares his story here:

christiancentury.org/article/2015-01/what-love-can-t-fix

My friend Matt, when he dropped his dad off at the hospital, he learned that love doesn't have the power to fix everything. But here is what else he learned. That sometimes, it's not the sheer force of love that saves us, but the dogged persistence of love. He says, "If hope is the thing with feathers, love is the thing with armor. It comes with reinforced steel, invisible to all the chemical imbalances of creation."

Friends, I hope we are learning this more and more every day: When the world is gritty, love sometimes has no choice but to be gritty right back, too.

Love sometimes cannot abide by politeness anymore, but has to resort to screaming and protesting and getting really, really mad.

The Canaanite woman can tell you that—love of her daughter gave her the strength to insist over and over again to no one less than Jesus himself that he was wrong. Because love sometimes has to stomp its feet and get red in the face and sometimes, oftentimes, love does have to insist on its own way, because the way we've wandered off on our own is dangerous and deadly.

Love sometimes has to put on the breastplate of righteousness, and the shield of faith, and the helmet of salvation and the sword of the Spirit, not because love is violent, but because love **will** keep standing, and in the meantime, there are slings and arrows and principalities and powers that would unseat love at any cost.⁴ Love has to dress itself up not in pearls and sweater sets, not in dresses and tuxedos and wedding best, but in faith, and truth, and light. Now that faith, truth, and light may be tattered and torn at the end of the day...but that is the attire that ensures when

the sun sets at the end of that day, it will rise again the next morning.

Because love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, and endures all things. Love endures all things.

Nowhere in scripture are we told that love will fix all things, but we are told over and over and over again that love can and will endure all things.

My friend Matt said, "Even when brain chemistry runs us down, love stays on its feet. Even when we can't see the path before us, love gets through. And someday, when sin and death run out of steam, when guilt and shame have no more worlds to conquer, when all those dark nights converge into one glorious sunrise, on that day, on that precious, promised day, love will still be standing."

And when Jesus sends word back to John the Baptist, still in prison, he told the disciples, "Go. Go and tell John what you are seeing. Go and tell him, that even now, even now when all seems lost, even now, when everything feels impossible: The eyes of the blind? They are being opened. The lame? They are walking. The lepers? They are being cleansed. And the poor? They are hearing good news."

And sometimes, some days, including on this very day, friends, that good news that is being heard—It is that love is patient. Except when it's not. That love is kind. But not always. Sometimes love gets unbelievably mad. It is true that love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. Except when it must be, in order to survive. The good news is that sometimes love **does** insist on its own way, because some things cannot and shall not be compromised. The good news is that love does not rejoice in wrongdoing, love rejoices in the truth, and love sure will tell you, with a whisper

⁴ Ephesians 6:10-17

or with a wail, the direction love is pointing, and love will do its darnedest to bring you along.

Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Even the worst the world has to offer. Even the brokenness of the cross. Even the darkness of the tomb.

That **is** the Word of the Lord.

That **is** the good news of the Gospel.

Because the love that is the resurrection of Jesus Christ, and the resurrection of us all, that love always does its best work in the dark.

That love endures all things. The love of God endures all things. The love of God will keep showing up and keep standing up until all of us are standing up again, too.

Come what may, the love of God endures — and **will** endure — all things.

May that give us the strength, and the grace, and the grit, that we might endure, as well.