

Words of Love

In one of Charles Schulz's classic *Peanuts* strips, Lucy van Pelt is talking with Charlie Brown. "You know what I don't understand?" she says. "I don't understand love."

Charlie Brown replies, "Who does?"

Lucy urges, "Explain love to me, Charlie Brown."

But Charlie Brown tells her, "You can't explain love. I can recommend a book or a poem or a painting, but I can't explain love."

Lucy demands, "Try, Charlie Brown, try."

Charlie Brown begins, "Well, let's say I see this beautiful, cute little girl walk by..."

Lucy interrupts, "Why does she have to be cute? Huh? Why can't someone fall in love with someone with freckles and a big nose? Explain that!"

Charlie Brown answers, "Well, maybe you're right. Let's just say I see this girl walk by with this great big nose."

Lucy exclaims, "I didn't say GREAT big nose!"

And Charlie Brown reflects, “You not only can’t *explain* love, you can’t even *talk* about it!”

You know, Charlie Brown has a point. Sometimes, when you love deeply, words don’t come easily. Novelists and playwrights and psychologists have written about love. Symphonies and sonnets and songs have been composed about love. Artists have attempted to portray love through painting and sculpture. And all kinds of people have tried to describe love.

But I don’t know that anyone has ever done a better job than the apostle Paul does in his first letter to Christians at Corinth. First Corinthians thirteen is surely one of the most eloquent passages in the New Testament. It’s familiar to us as “the love chapter.” But these words of love are written to a church whose members haven’t been too loving to one another—according to the reports Paul’s been hearing.

Now first-century Corinth is a secular, multi-cultural, pluralistic kind of society. In some ways, it’s not unlike our own. It’s an individualistic, me-first kind of culture. Many of its citizens worship idols. Others are a part of the believing community Paul planted in Corinth—a community that’s been divided by controversy and conflict. Divided by dissension and discord. Paul

knows there's only one way to bring the members of First Church Corinth back together again. That way is the way of love.

So Paul reflects on love. Paul discloses what the Corinthians need to know about love. And what we, today, need to know about love.

Love doesn't look inward. Love's not self-seeking or prideful. Love's not a braggart. Love doesn't covet. And love doesn't insist on keeping score. Love doesn't demand *what's in it for me?* Love's not *about* me.

It's about *you*. Love asks: *what can I do for you?* Love looks outward. Love *reaches* out. Seeking knowledge. Love yearns to know the beloved. Fully. Intimately.

There is One who knows you in just that way. The very same One who knew Jeremiah completely. Even before knitting him together in his mother's womb. This is the One who knows *you* completely, too. The One who knows the color of your eyes and the number of hairs on your head. The One who knows when you stand up and when you lie down. The One who knows what makes you laugh and what makes you cry. The One who knows when you hurt and *where* you hurt. The One who knows what's in your broken places, your deepest places. The One who knows the

secrets of your heart. The One who knows how hard you try to stay on the narrow path. The One who knows when your feet stray off that path.

This Holy One, this God, knows all about you. And me. God knows that I'm undeserving. Knows that we all are. God knows everything about you and me. And loves us anyway! Of course, this is the love we read about in Paul's letter. The tender love of God. The unconditional love of God. The radical love of God in Christ Jesus. Who comes to undeserving human creatures.

Who eats with them. Hangs out with them. Cares for them. Lives for them and dies for them. Tax collectors. Prostitutes. Sinners. Who loves them—and loves you and me!—with a limitless love. No matter *how* undeserving they—and we!—may be.

My brothers and sisters, that's exactly how you and I are called to love. It's not easy for us. Sometimes we're tempted to judge others. To deem them undeserving. And then to decide on that basis that they're not worthy of our love or of our help. But I wonder. Where would I be if God had judged *me* and decided not to love me and save me because I don't deserve it and I'm not worth it?

Thanks be to God, that's not what God did. What God *does* do is call you and me to respond to the grace-filled love we've been given by letting it flow through us and out from us. By passing it on. By loving those who aren't so easy to love. God calls us to share that love with those who aren't so lovable. To share that love with those who need it most. To receive the gift of God's love and let it transform us into lovers.

Seventeen centuries ago, St. Augustine painted a word-picture of love. "It has hands to help others. It has feet to hasten to the poor and needy. It has eyes to see misery and want. It has ears to hear the sighs and sorrows of men. That is what love looks like."

And isn't that exactly the way we picture Jesus?

God calls you and me to *learn* to love as Jesus loves. Calls us to love the way Christ loves. It doesn't happen overnight. It's a process. A vital process. Loving as he loves is the goal, the one objective that we who bear his name are asked to strive toward. For at the very center of a Christ-filled life is love.

Paul says that if I can speak in tongues but don't have love, I'm just making noise. It doesn't matter how long I've studied theology or how many seminary degrees I hold—if I don't have

love, they're worthless. It doesn't matter if I'm so filled with faith that a mountain jumps into the ocean at my command, if I don't have love. It doesn't even matter if I'm willing to die a martyr's death for what I believe. If I don't have love, it's all meaningless.

But loving means everything.

David Sanford puts it this way: “[Love] helps others, even if they never find out who did it...[Love] doesn't seek to take, but... willingly gives...Love doesn't think about how bad [another] person is, and certainly doesn't think of how it could get back at someone. Love is grieved deeply (as God is) over the evil in this world, but it rejoices over truth...Love doesn't give up, or quit, or diminish...Love keeps on keeping on.”

Even when love doesn't understand. Sometimes, doesn't knowing that we're not *expected* to understand everything offer relief and respite from the struggle of striving to comprehend incomprehensible mysteries? There's peace in knowing that God's in charge. There's peace in knowing that God loves. There's peace in knowing that one day, all will be revealed.

Our understanding and our knowledge are incomplete. But like knowledge, love endures beyond these bodies. Beyond these vessels of clay. At a memorial service for a young woman I knew,

her best friend stood up and said, “She taught me how to love.” With her life, she excelled at teaching others how to love because she herself loved so completely.

If someone close to *you* has transitioned into life beyond death, your love for that person hasn’t died. It’s endured! Love patterned after God’s love, love given to others lives in hearts and memories. Love is our legacy.

And love is our destiny. Today we hope in Christ Jesus. But one day, all that he has promised will be fulfilled. Today we see in a mirror—dimly. We have faith in things not seen. But one day we *will* see. Face to face. Faith will become sight. And hope will become reality. But love never ends! Today and tomorrow and always and forever, you are being drawn into—enfolded into—the abiding presence, the everlasting circle of the One whose nature and name is love.

In the name of God the Creator, God the Christ, and God the Holy Spirit. Amen.