

It's Complicated.

A sermon preached in Christ Church, Aspen, by the Rev. Bruce McNab.

4th Sunday after Epiphany Year C. January 31, 2010. (Text: 1 Cor. 13:1-13)

On Friday Joan and I went to a movie. We wanted to see something light, like a romantic comedy, so we saw *It's Complicated*, about a couple in their fifties who've been divorced from one another for ten years but who "fall in love" with each other again – or seem to – after re-connecting at their youngest child's graduation from college.

The "exes" then proceed to have an adulterous, romantic affair. The ex-husband is sure the whole thing is wonderful, because it "FEELS so good!" He decides to abandon Wife Number Two (and her bratty five-year old) and get back together with Wife Number One. Wife Number One has been caught up in the physical thrills too, just as much as he has, but she's not quite as certain that getting back together is what she wants.

The acting was good and the movie was funny —not a "perfect 10", but maybe a "7½". It was thought-provoking to me, and I discovered that its title works well for this sermon. Indeed, love is complicated. Relationships are complicated. To be honest: *life* is complicated.

We want love to be simple and easy, but it's not. We talk about "falling in love" as if loving another person usually happened by accident. We imagine that love can happen when we're not looking, or even when we're thinking about something else: "*Oops. Wow! ...Hey, look! I'm in love.*"

Sexual attraction, physical chemistry: those things can happen in a heartbeat. We may call that "love at first sight," but it's really not love, it's just *hormones!* Love is much more than that. Love grows. Love comes later. Love is not easy; it's *complicated*.

The verses that were read this morning from the thirteenth chapter of St. Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians are the Bible passage read most often at weddings. That's fine, but it tends to make people think this great "Song of Love" by Paul was originally written about romance and married life. But it wasn't. Not even close.

I want to talk a little about love and loving today. So I'm calling this sermon "*It's Complicated,*" subtitled "*An Introduction to Love.*"

To start with, I'd like us to get rid of the idea that authentic love has anything much to do with *how we feel*, our emotional state. It's clear that our culture is obsessed with emotions, not ideas. Don't we see voyeuristic TV shows every night of the week, including news shows where insensitive reporters stick microphones in front of, for example, sobbing parents whose little child has just been abducted, and say to these suffering people, "*Mr. and Mrs. Smith, you've just learned that your five year old daughter, Mary Sue, was taken from the family home in the early hours of this morning by two as-yet-unidentified assailants who broke into her bedroom. —How do you feel about that?*"

How do they **FEEL**?! What does this moron think? It makes them feel furious; it makes them feel terrified; it makes them feel overwhelmed; it makes them feel heartsick. —How else *could* normal parents possibly feel? Their child has been abducted by potential psychopaths!

Well... what if this mother and father are *Christians*? Jesus said, "Love your enemies," didn't he? Yes, he did. So, what then?

Let me tell you this: I'm a Christian – I'm even a professional Christian! – but if one of my three little girls had been stolen from her bedroom by anybody, I would have had no positive feelings for them. I would have been enraged. I would have wanted to find those people and do something dreadful to punish them if they had hurt my child. But those feelings would not have made me, therefore, "un-Christian" or "sub-Christian." Such emotions would just mark me as an ordinary man and a father. *Acting out* those emotions, however, would have been quite a different matter.

I'll tell you a personal story. Back in the '80s I had a busy psychiatrist in my parish who also happened to be the president of the state psychiatric association. His oldest child, a daughter named Greta, was a beautiful young woman with a great singing voice. She was active in our church youth group, an honor student, and the local high school homecoming queen. After college and nursing school, she became an Air Force nurse.

Shortly after she arrived at her first assignment as a newly minted second lieutenant, she was abducted from the parking lot of a Seven-Eleven store, raped, murdered, and her lifeless body abandoned in a field. Her family was in agony. Her friends were torn up. Her boyfriend could not get out of bed. It was the worst experience of my life as a pastor, either before or since. I never had a more difficult, more emotional funeral.

After a while her dad came to see to talk. Sometimes he came a couple of times a week, just to talk. I said, "John, don't you want to work through this with professional colleague, another psychiatrist?"

He said, "No. I'm a psychiatrist and I already know what I'll hear from them. It would be like talking to myself in a mirror. I'm a Christian, and I choose to work through this with you. I thought about it a lot, and I chose you. You're elected."

I'd been hoping he'd find another doctor to talk to. But God had put John and his family in my flock, and that meant I had to try to be a shepherd. —It wasn't easy. I was 38 years old and *way* out of my comfort zone.

John talked a lot, and I did my best to listen. For the longest time he just wanted to tell me what he and Greta's brothers would do if they could get their hands on the person that had raped and killed their sister, his beautiful daughter, his first-born, the sweet young woman who was the apple of his eye and the shining light of her family. It was very disturbing.

After listening to his revenge fantasy as long as I could, I finally said, "John, how can you keep dreaming about doing anything like this, about going to the trial and killing a man? Jesus doesn't want you to do these things, you know that. You've got to get to where you can decide forgive this guy and leave him in the Lord's hands, even ask forgiveness for him. Remember: Jesus says, 'Love your enemies.'"

John said, "Yeah, I know that. But I know this too: the more I talk about these things to you, the less likely I am ever to do them and the sooner I'll get to where I can think and act differently."

Love, indeed, was John's ultimate goal. But love is complicated. "Love" is not mostly about our emotional state at any given time. But love is very much about *controlling our negative emotions and instincts* – the

power of darkness that's inside all of us – and *choosing positive behavior* instead of the opposite. Not just toward people who've treated us hatefully, but also toward the much larger group of those for whom our natural reflex is mere indifference.

Paul says, "Love is patient. Love is kind." Do you know what *patience* is? Patience is the attitude of the father in Jesus' parable of the Prodigal Son. Patience is a breadth of spirit that acknowledges the sovereignty of God and trusts in the wisdom and mercy of God —no matter what. Being patient keeps you and me from trying to play "God" in situations where our raw emotions push us to intervene or get revenge. John learned to be patient and resist his emotional reflexes.

"Love is patient. Love is kind." To practice kindness is quite simply to choose to be useful to another person, in practical and caring ways, regardless of how we feel about that person.

This week I read a story by a Baptist preacher about a man named Roger, who many years ago tried to learn how to whittle. Roger went to an old fellow who was an accomplished wood carver to take lessons. Roger described himself as a pathetic student, but he remembered one piece of wisdom the old woodcarver gave him. One day the two of them were sitting side by side carving a little dog, and Roger – who was getting very frustrated – asked the master, *"How do you do this? What's the secret of carving?"* The old woodcarver looked at him thoughtfully for a while and then said, *"You just get yourself a piece of wood and cut off everything on it that doesn't look like a dog."*

When we read Paul's "Song of Love" in First Corinthians we see that this is where he begins. He starts with what needs to be cut away so that true love can become the shape of our lives. He says, *"Love is not envious or boastful. It is not arrogant or rude. Love does not insist on its own way. Love is not irritable or resentful. It does not rejoice in wrongdoing."*

There are a thousand more things that I could say about love and learning *how* to love, because love is the heart of life and the purpose of life. The Bible even says God "is love." But God is complicated, and loving is complicated. So one simple lesson about love is enough for one Sunday morning. And that simple lesson is this: *keep your eyes on Jesus and do the best you can to cut off everything in you that doesn't look like him.*

If we boil the Christian faith down to its essence, what's left at the end is not a creed or a confession of faith, not a catechism or a set of rules. What's left is a face, the face of undisguised, unambiguous, unconditional love: **THE FACE OF JESUS.**

When Jesus was among us, he showed us that love is always something you **DO**, not a way you **FEEL**. This is what distinguishes Christian love from either sloppy sentimentality or mere good intentions. This is what permits us to love even when we've been wronged, even in the face of our worst instincts.

You see, in the end, dear friends, love is always something you *do*.