



“Rain or Shine: Washington, D.C. Elderly couple eating dinner at their home on Lamont Street, N.W.” Photo by Gordon Parks. Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Division, FSA/OWI Collection [LC-USF34-013404-C].

## **MARRIAGE ENRICHMENT SUNDAY**

### **LECTIONARY COMMENTARY**

**Sunday, March 25, 2012**

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**Lection – 1 Corinthians 13:4-8** (New Revised Standard Version)

(v. 4) Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant (v. 5) or rude. It

does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; (v. 6) it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. (v. 7) It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. (v. 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.

## **I. Description of the Liturgical Moment**

“Love is at the center of marriage and a godly life.”

Marriage enrichment Sunday is significant in the life of the Church. It focuses attention on the marital relationship as sacred action through which love shared between spouses is grounded in a Godly life of creative, selfless love of God shown in Jesus Christ and in mutual fidelity to each other. This special day invites remembering and reflecting on marriage as the uniting of persons with each other and God as they share their vows “to love and cherish from this day forward . . . .” In this liturgy, two people pledge themselves to each other before others and in the presence and name of God. As marital partners, they become one flesh and a new creation where the love of God and selfless love, delight, and appreciation for each other is meant to continue to radiate in the midst of the triumphs and trials of life that inevitably come. During the liturgical moment of this Marriage Enrichment Sunday, remembering and reflecting is to result in our celebration of marriage as sacred action to which God calls persons, our affirming God’s extraordinary love expressed in marriage, and our commitment or re-commitment as marital partners to nurture and grow in it.

## **II. Biblical Interpretation for Preaching and Worship: 1 Corinthians 13:4-8**

### **Part One: The Contemporary Contexts of the Interpreter**

My husband and I recall the occasion when we shared with a group of high school youth that we were celebrating our 45<sup>th</sup> wedding anniversary. The entire group spontaneously rose to their feet, clapped and cheered! “Wow!” One of them said, “That’s cool!” They saw our longevity as a married couple as something important; and for some of them, it stood in stark contrast to the dissolved marriages of their parents or difficult family circumstances. We shared the significance of it, embraced and kissed, and the room exploded again with a joyous response. The truth is that there are other couples like us whose stories are ones of love, longevity, and joy. Certainly, with regard to marriage in the Black community, there is also evidence, according to the 2005 report of the Institute for American values, that “marriage typically and substantially improves the well-being of African American women, men, and children.”<sup>1</sup>

However there is also another side—some truth-telling—to share, even though truth-telling that makes us sit up and notice the tough stuff of life is often difficult in an age when we see so much bad news in the media on a daily basis. We may say, “No more bad news, please!” Yet, we are compelled to be honest and “tell it like it is” if we are to see, claim, and act on the good news that God has for us.

There is a mountain of evidence that marriage is in trouble in the Black community. The July 28, 2011 article “7 Political Issues That the Black Church Has Been Silent About” reported findings that in the 1940s, the divorce rate in the Black community was 18 percent, but by 2003 it had risen to 32 percent; and the projected divorce rate among Black women in their first marriage may go as high as 70 percent in the coming years.<sup>2</sup> The marriage rate has also dropped from 79 percent in 1970 to 57 percent in 2008.<sup>3</sup> Even though two people marry because of their expressed love for each other or, as is often said, because “they fell in love,” enduring love that holds a “spark” and seeks the good of the other too often diminishes too easily and too fast. Couples today seem to struggle to act on their capacity to engage in marriage as a sacred action as shown by what has been called a divorce revolution or “the steady displacement of a marriage culture by a culture of divorce and unwed parenthood.”<sup>4</sup>

Blame for the shift in marital well-being is placed on economic conditions, one or the other mate’s inability to fulfill expectations for high levels of fulfillment amidst the growing cultural ethos of expressive individualism, greater acceptance of single parenthood, and acceptance of divorce as the norm. But the qualities of marital relationships in today’s world also increasingly build on “Marketplace” concepts of love and happiness portrayed in the media (i.e. TV, movies, videos, magazines, books, music, and the internet including Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, etc.). The media set forth people’s expectation of flawless mates, fun and easy relationships, and “love and relationships to be on their schedule, on their own terms, and to come without too much personal sacrifice. . . . [There is] a ‘What have you done for me lately?’ attitude in relationships.”<sup>5</sup> Marital conflicts, competitiveness, and dissatisfaction result from these expectations. Divorce becomes the answer to failure in meeting these expectations amidst the belief that one deserves better.<sup>6</sup> The point is that the media portray what may be called a “narcissistic trap” wherein persons embrace values of self-centeredness, competition, personal achievement, material gain, power, and fleeting physical pleasure over against committed, enduring relationships in which mutual love and care are celebrated and acted upon.

There is critical need for reversal of the reality that far too many marriages today function as “blues songs” rather than as “gospel messages” in a Godly life of faith, hope, and the supremacy of love patterned after God’s love shown in Jesus Christ. As Christians, we need new and different answers to the question raised in the song of Tina Turner, “What’s Love Got to Do With It?” And the answers must bring us to the point of seeing and acting on marital relationship as sacred action!

## **Part Two: Biblical Commentary**

The Letter of Apostle Paul to the church in Corinth addressed a competitive, divided, and conflict-ridden church. Written around 53 or 54 A.D., Paul’s communication in 1 Corinthians 13:4-8 followed an extended message in 1 Corinthians 12 that the diverse groups comprising the membership were in need of a unifying view of personal differences and beliefs about spiritual gifts. He sought to make the point that there were spiritual gifts of the members that were of

equal value and should not be placed in competition.

In Chapter 13, his poetic message focuses on love as the greatest human expression without which no value or worth is possible. The expression of love about which he writes comes from God and reflects God's relational nature that is demonstrated in the person and ministry of Jesus Christ. It surpasses all other gifts.

Although the message of Paul is to church folk besieged with competitiveness, division, and conflict, it addresses the same relational issues that often emerge in contemporary marriages. His emphasis on love is particularly applicable to today's institution of marriage where marital partners are in need of addressing issues of conflict and competition between them. The importance of the message for today is that, if it is really embraced and lived, then the stories of love and longevity will abound in the present and in generations to come.

The qualities of Christian love appear in verses 4-7 first in an affirmative way of how love is positively expressed, followed by manners in which love is disaffirmed.

- ❖ *Love is patient. Love is kind.* In marriage enrichment workshops my husband, Dr. Edward Wimberly, and I lead, the statement inevitably comes, "There are some things he or she does that frankly get on my last nerve." In our individualistic culture, there is also the view that "you shouldn't put up with any flaws in your partner—you're too good for that."<sup>7</sup> Paul's intent is to bring to awareness that the value and importance we assign to our own uniqueness is overridden by our capacity to remain in loving and kind relationship with another whose personal qualities and habits differ from our own. Patience and kindness are qualities of loving endurance and the expression of a sympathetic, beneficial, or positive rather than critical nature. In a sense, this expression of love is a "creative, letting-be dimension of love [that] attends to the other in all his or her fullness even at the cost, the ultimate cost of the self."<sup>8</sup> In marriage, this expression of love draws partners together rather than apart in ways that result not simply in new and renewed appreciation of the other's way of being and doing, but sometimes in one's embrace of a particular way of the other as helpful, and the relinquishment of one's own way as gain and not loss.
- ❖ *Love is not envious or boastful or arrogant, or rude.* Current difficult economic circumstances place Black couples and their families disproportionately at risk for financial loss or disaster. Moreover, opportunities for employment are not always equally available to both partners or commensurate with educational preparation. What they see others outside the marriage have that results in status anxiety may become the seed-bed of envy; and what one spouse is able to achieve that is out of reach for the mate may become grounds for the achiever's lauding it over the other or the envy of the other. Paul makes the point that if love for God, others, and self is present and prevails, then there is no room for coveting what anyone else has or for inflating one's own sense of importance or accomplishment. Love makes possible the kind of intimacy, unity, and reciprocity

reflective of God's loving relationship with God's people that caused Black forbears to sing, "I don't feel no-ways tired. . . I don't believe God brought me this far to leave me."

- ❖ *It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful.* A part of the "narcissism trap" in today's culture is reflected in self-centeredness and self-admiration that results in a person's insistence on having things as she or he wants them with little or no concern for the desires or needs of someone else. In its extreme, this kind of insistence lends itself to manipulating or exploiting the other or treating the other as a tool in order to satisfy the self.<sup>9</sup> Irritability and resentment become expressed outcomes of non-compliance with the person's demand. But Paul earnestly states that the supremacy of love reverses this kind of one-sided relationship that leads to relational conflict. Rather than turning personal preferences into a battlefield, love places things in perspective. Love moves persons toward considering and communicating together about the ideal images they have of doing things and revising them in ways that move the couple toward a shared mutual relationship.<sup>10</sup>
- ❖ *It does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in truth.* The thought is often expressed by couples in their journey toward marriage: "I met the perfect" man or woman. In this declaration lies an unspoken assumption and even an expectation of a perfect marriage or one that is devoid of big flaws. Yet we humans are not flawless, and marital relationships do not proceed without occasions when our flaws become known and mistakes become real. But, what do we do when this happens? The practice of love described by Paul points to hard work that emphasizes seriousness and truth-telling in dealing with actions that dishonor, hurt, injure, or aggrieve another. This can be "tough love" indeed that reveals marital partners' toughness of commitment, releases forgiveness, and frees their joyful reaffirmation of the "Endless Love" about which Lionel Richie sings. It may also point couples toward the truthful need for intervention from which needful direction may emerge.
- ❖ *It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.* I often tell the story of the loss of four children through premature birth, including a baby girl who lived two days and then died. I grieved deeply and so did my husband, Ed. The thoughts came: How could I go on? How could we go on? Then, at a later time, Ed had emergency quadruple bypass surgery followed by the long wait with the doctor's admitted uncertainty of his survival etched in my thoughts and heart. The question then: How can I bear it? And, then the answer: "The love of God, how sweet and pure, how measureless, how strong!" Paul's message goes further by reminding us that the love of one for another happens in tandem with and as the result of God's presence and boundless love in the worst of times. Love for God and love with and for another is expressed out of faith in God that frees us from fear and uncertainty. Moreover, it is an expression of hope in God that makes possible our willing movement toward and into an unknown future even in the midst of what feels like utter chaos. It gives us a confident openness to go on as our forbears would say: "I shall go, I will go to see what the end will be."

- ❖ *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.* I still remember the white ceramic cross that hung in my parents' bedroom. Painted pink flowers appeared at the center and the words "Love never fails" were etched across the flowers in green. 1 Corinthians 13:8 appeared after it in small letters. Paul's declaration about the nature of love had meaning for them, and its meaning is of no less importance for all in Christian marital relationships. Paul emphasizes that there is a permanency about Christian love. It is unconquerable, or as Barclay reminds us in his commentary in The Letters to the Corinthians, it is like love described in the Song of Solomon (8:7): "Many waters cannot quench love, neither can floods drown it."<sup>11</sup> Barclay also continues by commenting on Paul's emphasis on the absolute completeness of love that is seen in God's love through Christ in the world and that provides a model for loving human relationships to reflect.<sup>12</sup> When it is expressed in marital relationships, this kind of love to which Paul points is immeasurable or even extravagant to the point that these relationships "reflect the love of God that when others see how we treat each other they want to know our 'secret' because they'll want a marriage as healthy as ours."<sup>13</sup>

## Challenge

The capacity to express love in the marital relationship as Paul has presented it is within our reach. Love expressed in the Godly life Paul described is not impossible! But, it is important from time to time for marital partners to "Get the Rap" on where we are in our relationships and, by so doing, capture or recapture the love and celebrate it and our marital relationship as sacred action.

Couples are invited to engage in the following way to "Get the Rap on Marital Relationships":

Put the "R" in Rap

- **Recall** the vows you made at your wedding.
- **Review** your vows.
- **Reaffirm** your vows.

Put the "A" in Rap

- **Assess** the importance of love in your marriage in relation to other goals within and outside of marriage. Include your assessment of the impact of media on your views of marriage in light of your understanding of "Love at the Center of Marriage and a Godly Life."

- ***Anchor*** yourselves in the wisdom of the Christian faith through your study of Paul’s message in 1 Corinthians 13:4-8 and your participation in marriage enrichment seminars. Extend this anchoring by drawing on resources from Black Marriage Day on <http://www.blackmarriageday.com/> and the African American Healthy Marriage Initiative (AAHMI) on [www.aahmi.net/resources.html](http://www.aahmi.net/resources.html). Download, read, and reflect on the song “My Vow to You,” found on [http://www.6lyrics.com/my\\_vow\\_to\\_you-lyrics-surel.aspx](http://www.6lyrics.com/my_vow_to_you-lyrics-surel.aspx).
- ***Activate*** a spiritually rich marital ritual life of individual and shared Bible study and prayer as well as ways of coping with outside pressures and cultivating nurturing loving relationships characterized by open communication, honesty, mutuality, cooperation, reliability, and generosity.

Put the “P” in Rap

- ***Picture*** a love-centered marriage, by sharing what it looks like, feels like, and acts like.
- ***Pray*** for the permanency, completeness, and extravagance of a love-centered marriage.
- ***Plan*** for a Godly life of love in marriage that reflects God’s love shown through Jesus Christ, with concrete ideas to make it happen including special days, recreation, and spontaneous times of love-making and celebration.

### **Descriptive Details**

The descriptive details of this passage include:

**Sounds:** A quiet kiss; a tear falling as someone stands at the graveside of his or her spouse; an irritated-sounding spouse; a spouse boasting; rejoicing in the truth; tongues ceasing;

**Sights:** A patient spouse; a spouse who is proud of his or her beloved; a spouse bearing all things; a spouse asleep on a hospital cot near his or her beloved; a world without prophecies; and

**Colors:** A white wedding dress; a black wedding tuxedo; the color of the favorite flower of your beloved; grey hair; and the color of the lips of your beloved.

### **III. Quotes for the Sermonic Moment**

Build a sermon using quotes from the following material.

***Quotes from This Lectionary Commentary to Focus Attention***

- Marriage enrichment Sunday is significant in the life of the Church. It focuses attention on the marital relationship as sacred action through which love shared between spouses is grounded in a Godly life of creative, selfless love of God shown in Jesus Christ and in mutual fidelity to each other. This special day invites remembering and reflecting on marriage as the uniting of persons with each other and God as they share their vows “to love and cherish from this day forward . . . .”
- There is increasing evidence that marriage is in trouble in the Black community. Couples today seem to struggle to act on their capacity to engage in marriage as a sacred action as shown by what has been called a divorce revolution or “the steady displacement of a marriage culture by a culture of divorce and unwed parenthood.”<sup>14</sup> There is critical need for reversal of the reality that far too many marriages today function as “blues songs” rather than as “gospel messages” in a Godly life of faith, hope, and the supremacy of love patterned after God’s love shown in Jesus Christ. As Christians, we need new and different answers to the question raised in the song of Tina Turner, “What’s Love Got to Do With It?” And the answers must bring us to the point of seeing and acting on marital relationship as sacred action!
- Although the message of Paul is to church folk besieged with competitiveness, division, and conflict, it addresses the same relational issues that often emerge in contemporary human nature and those occurring in marriage. His emphasis on love is particularly applicable to today’s institution of marriage where marital partners are in need of addressing issues of conflict and competition between them.
- Paul’s intent is to bring to awareness that the value and importance we assign to our own uniqueness is overridden by our capacity to remain in loving and kind relationship with another whose personal qualities and habits differ from our own.
- Paul points to hard work that emphasizes seriousness and truth-telling in dealing with actions that dishonor, hurt, injure, or aggrieve another. This can be “tough love” indeed that reveals marital partners’ toughness of commitment, releases forgiveness, and frees their joyful reaffirmation of the “Endless Love” about which Lionel Richie sings. It may also point couples toward the truthful need for intervention from which needful direction may emerge.
- Paul’s message goes further by reminding us that the love of one for another happens in tandem with and as the result of God’s presence and boundless love in the worst of times. Love for God and love with and for another is expressed out of faith in God that frees us from fear and uncertainty. . . . It gives us a confident openness to go on as our forbears would say: “I shall go, I will go to see what the end will be.”
- Paul emphasizes that there is a permanency about Christian love. . . Paul’s emphasis [is]

on the absolute completeness of love that is seen in God's love through Christ in the world . . . [L]ove to which Paul points is immeasurable or even extravagant to the point that these relationships "reflect the love of God that when others see how we treat each other they want to know our 'secret' because they'll want a marriage as healthy as ours."<sup>15</sup>

**Quote from This Lectionary Commentary to Inspire Action**

- The capacity to express love in the marital relationship as Paul has presented it is within our reach. Love expressed in the Godly life Paul described is not impossible!

**IV. Teaching Aids for Marriage Enrichment Sunday and use of 1 Corinthians 13:4-8**

- Utilize the Outline on "Get the Rap on Marital Relationships" found above under "Descriptive Details" to develop a marital enrichment seminar. Draw on resources that appear in that section. In addition, use:

Whitfield, Keith E., Howard J. Markham, Scott M. Stanley, and Susan L. Blumberg. Fighting for Your African American Marriage. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2001..

- Draw on commentaries such as:

Barclay, William. The Letters to the Corinthians: The New Daily Study Bible (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2002).

Evans, James L. Immersion Bible Studies: 1 & 2 Corinthians (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2011).

Sampley, J. Paul . "The First Letter to the Corinthians: Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections," in Leander Keck, Convener and Senior New Testament Editor, The New Interpreter's Bible, Volume X (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2002), 950–957.

**Notes**

1. Blackman, Lorraine, Obie Clayton, Norvil Glenn, Linda Malone-Colon, and Alex Roberts. "The Consequence of Marriage for African Americans: A Comprehensive Literature Review." New York, NY: Institute for American Values, 2005, 54.

2. Jerrod, Anthony. "7 Political Issues That the Black Church Has Been Silent About." Atlanta Post. July 28, 2011. Online location: [www.atlantapost.com/2011/.../28/7-political-issues-that-the-black-church-has-been-silent-about/](http://www.atlantapost.com/2011/.../28/7-political-issues-that-the-black-church-has-been-silent-about/)
3. See research reported by the American Values organization. Online location: [http://www.americanvalues.org/pdfs/IAV\\_Marriage\\_Index\\_09\\_25\\_09.pdf](http://www.americanvalues.org/pdfs/IAV_Marriage_Index_09_25_09.pdf)
4. Council on Families. Marriage in America: A Report to the Nation. New York: Institute for American Values, 1995, 1. Online location: [www.eric.ed.gov/ERICWebPortal/recordDetail?acc.no.](http://www.eric.ed.gov/ERICWebPortal/recordDetail?acc.no.) and [www.americanvalues.org/html/r-marriage\\_in\\_america.html](http://www.americanvalues.org/html/r-marriage_in_america.html) accessed 28 October 2011
5. Twenge, Jean M., Ph.D. and W. Keith Campbell, Ph.D. The Narcissism Epidemic: Living in the Age of Entitlement. New York: Free Press, 2009. p. 221. Additional discussion on relationships in the current narcissistic age are found on pages 85, 220–223.
6. Ibid., 221.
7. Ibid.
8. McDonagh, Enda. "Love." The Westminster Dictionary of Christian Theology. Eds. Alan Richardson and John Bowden. Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1983. p. 342.
9. The Narcissism Epidemic. p. 19.
10. Edward Wimberly calls this movement toward mutuality a developmental process in which two people address together their "couple mythology" or the convictions they bring into marriage about the ideal mate. Edward P. Wimberly. Counseling African American Marriages and Families. Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1997. pp. 58–59.
11. Barclay, William. The Letter to the Corinthians: The New Daily Study Bible. Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2002. p.147.
12. Ibid., pp. 147–148.
13. Wright, Cindy and Steve. "Loving Extravagantly—Marriage Message #235." Online location: <http://www.marriagemissions.com/loving-extravagantly-marriage-message-235/>
14. Marriage in America: A Report to the Nation.
15. "Loving Extravagantly—Marriage Message #235." Online location: <http://www.marriagemissions.com/loving-extravagantly-marriage-message-235/>