

Love Is Never Canceled

Commencement season is upon us. Degrees are being conferred over Zoom. Diplomas are arriving via FedEx. Yard signs in my neighborhood tell me who is graduating from where. It is not the same. It is not what anyone expected. “Pomp and Circumstance” sounds different when streamed through microphones into computers scattered everywhere, and it is simply odd to be wearing a graduation robe in one’s living room, as if you are the lone graduate of your own solitary school. Everyone is trying to make it ok, or at least better. Some high schools have postponed their ceremonies hoping that larger gatherings might be possible later this summer. Some communities have taken over drive-in theaters; at least community in Vermont is using a ski lift to hand out diplomas. Graduates will ride up the lift with an empty seat between each one. They will receive their diploma, move their tassel at the top, take some photos, and ride back down.¹

The passage I just read is not one associated with graduations typically but rather with weddings. Paul’s exquisite poetry has been read at weddings for generations. I’ve preached it, too. But it helps to remember that Paul is not preaching at a wedding. He is not smiling gently at a couple with stars and moonbeams in their eyes. Instead he is writing to a church community he holds dear, one that he fears is coming apart at the seams. In chapter 12 Paul celebrates the varied gifts that the Spirit gives to the community and points out the importance of all the different parts of the body of Christ. The Corinthians are a bit competitive, apparently. They are convinced that some gifts and some of the gifted are more important than others, and they are particularly enamored with the idea of speaking in tongues. At the end of chapter twelve, Paul wants to shift their understanding away from who has what or who does what better. He wants them to stop keeping score, and he tells them there is a better way, a more excellent way, a way beyond measuring. And that way is love.

I’m guessing many of us can quote at least part of this text from memory. We remember the love is patient part or the part about love not seeking its own way. Maybe we remember something about love not being boastful or rude. And we tend to jump to the end, to the part that reminds us that faith, hope, and love

¹ <https://www.wcax.com/content/news/New-Hampshire-high-school-plans-ski-lift-graduation-570499291.html>

remain. And we remember that the greatest is love. But I'm thinking we forget the middle part. In some cases, the preacher might even skip over the middle part because it seems to be a tangent, or maybe Paul just going off on a random detour before he gets back on track with the lovely thought at the end. But the middle part—the not knowing part—is crucial, especially now. Because for all of the degrees being conferred, all of the diplomas waiting to be framed, there is still so very much we do not know, even now, two millennia later.

Commencement speeches look and sound different this year, but some things are eternal. There will be those that are chock-a-block with clichés and trite thoughts, and there will be those that contain gems of wisdom that preach in a way, at least to me. The writer George Saunders gave the commencement address for Syracuse University about seven years ago, and he spoke about regrets. In the speech he says that he does not regret being poor on occasion or his short-term job in a slaughter house. He does not regret getting sick after a poorly-timed dip in a river in Sumatra. Nor does he regret the occasional humiliation:

Like once, playing hockey in front of a big crowd, including this girl I really liked, I somehow managed, while falling and emitting this weird whooping noise, to score on my own goalie, while also sending my stick flying into the crowd, nearly hitting that girl? No, 'he says,' I don't even regret that.²

What does he regret?

In seventh grade, this new kid joined our class. In the interest of confidentiality, her Convocation Speech name will be "SARAH." SARAH was small, shy. She wore these blue cat's-eye glasses that, at the time, only old ladies wore. When nervous, which was pretty much always, she had a habit of taking a strand of hair into her mouth and chewing on it.

So she came to our school and our neighborhood, and was mostly ignored, occasionally teased ('Your hair taste good?' — that sort of thing). I could see this hurt her. I still remember the way she'd look after such an insult: eyes cast down, a little gut-kicked, as if, having just been reminded of her place in things, she was trying, as much as possible, to disappear. After a while she'd drift away, hair-strand still in her mouth. At home, I imagined, after school, her mother would say, you know: "How was your day,

² <https://6thfloor.blogs.nytimes.com/2013/07/31/george-saunderss-advice-to-graduates/>. The student's name has been changed from Ellen.

sweetie?” and she’d say, “Oh, fine.” And her mother would say, “Making any friends?” and she’d go, “Sure, lots.” Sometimes I’d see her hanging around alone in her front yard, as if afraid to leave it. And then — they moved. That was it. No tragedy, no big final hazing. One day she was there, next day she wasn’t. End of story.

Now, why do I regret *that*? Why, forty-two years later, am I still thinking about it? Relative to most of the other kids, I was actually pretty *nice* to her. I never said an unkind word to her. In fact, I sometimes even (mildly) defended her. But still. It bothers me.

So here’s something I know to be true, although it’s a little corny, and I don’t quite know what to do with it: What I regret most in my life are *failures of kindness*.³

I wonder if this is what Paul is trying to warn the Corinthian church about, if maybe he is worried that their competing to be the best at this church thing is leading them to flunk being loving or being kind. Maybe he is concerned that they are ultimately missing the point of what it is to be the church in the end, to being the body of Christ in the world. It is work to be loving and to be kind, but that is the work the church is called to do. All of our preaching, all of our proclaiming, all of our clever words as Paul mentioned last week mean nothing if we fail to act with love—genuine, humble, put-others-first love. If the Corinthian church hears nothing else, I get the sense that Paul wants them to hear this and internalize it. My hunch is that he wants us to hear that, too.

And I get the feeling that Paul, like Saunders has some regrets of his own. When he speaks of putting away childish things, I imagine him shaking his head when he looks back on his life and on his insistence on being right, on getting his way, on being the best and the brightest. He sees things differently now, and interestingly enough, as he has grown in faith, he has come to recognize just how much he does not know, how much he will never know. And yet there is one thing he does know, that love—God-given love does. Not. End. Period. All of the shiny things, all of the clever words, all of the trappings will end, but love will not, and Paul wants to be in the never-ending love business. He seems to think that is what the church should be about, too, and so he goes to great lengths to tell the Corinthians—and us—what love is, or perhaps more importantly what love does.

³ <https://6thfloor.blogs.nytimes.com/2013/07/31/george-saunderss-advice-to-graduates/>

Because that's how this text reads in its original form. Love is not a static ideal cross-stitched on a sampler embellished with lots of pretty adjectives. No. Love acts. Love does:

Paul's claims are that love 'shows patience' and 'acts with kindness.' Here, love is a busy, active thing that never ceases to work. It is always finding ways to express itself for the good of others.⁴

The good of others... that is always love's aim. The good of outcasts like Sarah, the good of the neighbor who talks too much, the good of the stranger who honks at us in the parking lot or gets too close in the grocery store, the good of the child who cannot find the words to name her fears, the good of the parent who just can't catch a break, the good of the friend who thinks our faith is hooey, the good of the relative who votes entirely opposite of us, the good of mask wearers and mask shunners alike. "Love is always finding ways to express itself for the good of others." Always. Always. Always.

Believe it or not, we will graduate from this pandemic. There will be an "after" for all of us, including the church. We will have advanced degrees in Zoom, Facebook Live, mask wearing, handwashing, and social distancing. We will also know what it is to grieve from a distance and to work ourselves to the bone and worry our nerves until they are raw. And we will have a chance to look back at how we were with one another during this odd and uncertain season. We will have flubbed some things, and we will have gotten some things right. We will see the ways we still fall short of the beloved community God intends, and maybe we will find a new appreciation for our shared humanity. But my hope and prayer is that we the church will not leave failures of kindness in our wake. There is so much right now that tempts us to fight for our own way, to look out for our own interests, but Paul reminds us that we are called to something more, something better, something lasting that cannot be measured and will not run out. Love—as others have said—is not and never will be canceled, not because of us but because of the one who loves us first and forever. And we are called to embody that love. That love, that act of loving does not stop at the church door. It never did, thank goodness, or we would be truly lost right now. No, that love does not stop at the church door. And by the grace of God and the kindness of God's church, it never will.

Thanks be to God. Amen.

⁴ Brian Peterson, http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=2734