

Lucia Lloyd's sermon
January 31, 2009

Today's "love passage" from 1 Corinthians 13 is one of the most beautiful sections of the writing of the Apostle Paul, and it is a particular favorite at weddings. When Marshall and I got married, one of our wedding presents was a framed copy of this scripture passage with the words arranged in the shape of a heart, and it still hangs on the wall right above the dining room table.

Elizabeth Gilbert, the author of *Eat, Pray, Love*, has just written a new book about love and marriage. It is entitled *Committed: A Skeptic Makes Peace With Marriage*. She had gone through a disastrous first marriage and a very nasty divorce, and so had a lot of resistance to the whole idea of marriage. She does not want to get hurt that way again, and she also does not want to hurt Felipe, the man she loves. She is so adamant about wanting to warn him about what he's getting himself into that she sits him down by the bank of a river and presents him with a list of her five most awful character flaws.

He just smiles and says, "Is there anything you would now like to tell me about yourself that I didn't already know?"

"Do you still love me?" I asked.

"Still." He confirmed.

She writes, "Because this is the essential question, isn't it? I mean, once the initial madness of desire has passed and we are faced with each other as dim-witted mortal fools—how is it that any of us find the ability to love and forgive each other at all, much less enduringly." Felipe is quiet for a long time, and then he tells her about getting started in the jewelry business. He explains that when he went to Brazil to buy gemstones, he would often buy what is called "a parcel." A parcel is a random collection of gems that the wholesaler puts together, for example, 20 or 30 aquamarines at once. They say you can get a better deal buying them all in a bunch, but you have to be careful because the guy is trying to rip you off by unloading his bad gemstones on you by packaging them together with a few really good ones.

Felipe explains, "So when I first started in the jewelry business, I used to get in trouble because I'd get too excited about the one or two perfect aquamarines in the parcel, and I wouldn't pay as much attention to the junk they threw in there. After I got burned

enough times, I finally got wise and learned this—you have to ignore the perfect gemstones. Don't even look at them twice because they're blinding. Just put them away and have a careful look at the really bad stones. Look at them for a long time and then ask yourself honestly, 'Can I work with these? Can I make something out of this?'

"It's the same with relationships, I think. People always fall in love with the most perfect aspects of each other's personalities. Who wouldn't? Anybody can love the most wonderful parts of another person. But that's not the clever trick. The really clever trick is this: Can you accept the flaws? Can you look at your partner's faults honestly and say, 'I can work around that?' Because the good stuff is always going to be there, and it's always going to be pretty and sparkly, but the crap underneath can ruin you."

'Are you saying you're clever enough to work around my worthless, junky, crappy bits?' I asked.

'What I'm trying to say, darling, is that I've been watching you carefully for a long time already, and I believe I can accept the whole parcel.'

'Thank you,' I said, and I meant it. I meant it with every flaw in my being.

Kendall, Mary, Angela, and Rain, I hope you will remember this sermon and keep this good advice in mind when the time comes for you to think about which person you want to marry. Taking a good long look at that person's worst flaws before you decide whether to commit the rest of your life to that person is very sound advice. It is part of what our Episcopal wedding liturgy means when it says "marriage is not to be entered into unadvisedly or lightly." Remember to ask yourself if you want the whole parcel with this person. And remember also how important it is that the other person accept both your most attractive and your least attractive traits, your whole parcel.

Gilbert herself is deeply touched by this acceptance of her. She goes on, "To be fully seen by somebody, then, and to be loved anyhow—this is a human offering that can border on the miraculous. Maybe creating a big enough space within your consciousness to hold and accept someone's contradictions—someone's idiocies, even—is a kind of divine act. Perhaps transcendence can be found not only on solitary mountaintops or in monastic settings, but also at your own kitchen table, in the daily acceptance of your partner's most tiresome, irritating faults." Yes, that sounds to me exactly like what Jesus had in mind when he told us to forgive seventy times seven times.

It's been a number of years now since Marshall and I stood at the front of the church I grew up in, and listened to that love passage from 1 Corinthians 13, and gave each other, not just rings, but the parcels of ourselves. But an interesting thing has happened in the marriage over the years, through all the ups and downs of our lives together. It used to seem to me that the parcel I had accepted was a mixed bag, with some sparkling gems and some bits of junk. It used to seem that the "good traits" and the "bad traits" were two entirely different things. But the more I live with this parcel the more I realize that the traits that I find most annoying turn out to be exactly the same traits that attracted me in the first place. I complain that his attachment to routine and his resistance to change get on my nerves, but then again, wasn't that kind of steadiness and reliability what I was looking for in a husband? I whine about how much time he spends researching his dead ancestors, but wasn't it that intellectual curiosity and determination to learn that appealed to me from our very first conversation? Even his deep anxiety about being late, an anxiety formed in response to some of the painful and difficult parts of his childhood, is, at its root, also a desire to be responsible, and to please people he cares about. Now that I have accepted the whole parcel, it turns out to be not so much a mixed bag in which some items are good and other items are bad. Instead, it turns out that the traits that bother me are one side of the coin, inseparable from the side of the coin that has been endearing from the get-go. Even the things that used to seem like worthless junk, (and which seem like worthless junk each time I am in an argument) now seem like part of a heavy gold coin of great value, in a bag full of gold coins of great value.

In listening to people who are grieving the death of a spouse or partner, I am often struck by how often they miss the annoying parts of the person as well as the charming parts. They grieve for the way he collected dead batteries as well as the way he cleared the yard. They grieve for his infuriating hard-headedness as well as his dogged determination toward what was right. They grieve for both sides of the coin because they loved both sides of the coin.

One of the hardest theological words to explain is the simple word "grace." It means forgiving someone's flaws, but it's more than that. It means accepting someone's flaws, but it's more than that. Grace means loving someone's flaws. Grace means that

with all our flaws, all our sins, God loves us, God loves us to death, God loves us to death on a cross. And God gives us the grace to love each other. It is indeed a divine act.

Which is not to say that any of these relationships do not contain moments of wanting to throw the whole parcel out the window. One of the benefits of marriage is that the commitment gives you some extra motivation to give yourselves time to see the other side of the coin than the one that is so maddening; the commitment helps love to be patient. Still, marriage is not the only way to accomplish this patience. The love passage in 1 Corinthians 13 is often read at weddings, but when the Apostle Paul wrote it, he was not writing about romantic love or marriage. He was writing about the love among members of a church community. This love passage in 1 Corinthians 13 is the culmination of the passage we heard last Sunday in 1 Corinthians 12 that talks about the way in which we are all members of the body of Christ. When I look at all the various people I love, my friends, my kids, my relatives, and my parishioners, I realize that things in them that I find most difficult are the flip side of the things I appreciate and admire in them, and that in the end I love both sides of these coins that enrich my life in countless ways. And it is a joy to see the ways in which love among you is patient, as you accept each other, forgive each other, and care for each other. It is a joy to see the ways in which your strengths fill in for each other's weaknesses. It is a joy to see your commitment to each other and to this faith family, through all the ups and downs of life. The things in other church members that bother us might seem to drive away a sense of holiness, but when our love is patient we may find that the opposite is true. Gilbert is right that transcendence can be found not only on solitary mountaintops or in monastic settings, but also at your own kitchen table, in the daily acceptance of another person's tiresome, irritating faults. At the Communion table we find God's ultimate acceptance of our tiresome, irritating faults, in the body broken for us and the blood shed for the forgiveness of sins. The transcendence happens not in spite of our faults, but right in the middle of them. At the Communion table, we also find, each Sunday, the opportunity to accept each other, with all our faults, and to experience the love that is patient. We confess our faults and our sins to God and ask, "Do you still love me?" And God answers "Still." And in the middle of all our faults, God continues to give us the grace to love each other still. It is a divine act, and we are blessed to be part of it.