

What Does Real Love Look Like?

A Sermon for Valentine's Day

Preached by

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Today, Valentine's Day, we're looking at one of the most overused and least understood words in the English language: "Love." Hollywood loves love stories: romantic comedies, tragedies, stories of unrequited love and love gone bad. Even movies that aren't about love at all often have the Hollywood version of love thrown in for spice.

Hollywood loves love stories, because *we* love love stories. Think about the great love stories – *Sleepless in Seattle*, *Ghost*, *Fatal Attraction* – I bet you can remember who you saw each of those movies with. No matter how many "romances" it turns out, Hollywood has a hard time showing what real love looks like, doesn't it? Instead, we usually get something a little like this picture of love, taken from that touching story of true love in a police uniform, *The Naked Gun*.

Click for video: <http://GrowWithSecond.org/files/Video/20100214.mpg>

[The tongue-in-cheek video segment shows a man and a woman supposedly falling in love, with all the Hollywood clichés, including a slow motion scene of them holding hands while running through waves at the ocean.]

The next line in the movie concludes this portrait of "true" love. When they are saying goodnight outside her door, Priscilla Presley's character says to Detective Drebin, "I had a wonderful date, Frank. I can't believe that we just met yesterday."

In Hollywood, this is the formula for love:

1. Meet complete stranger.
2. Become instantly attracted or instantly repulsed. It doesn't matter that much because in about 10 minutes they will...
3. Jump into bed.
4. And after that, just maybe you will learn each other's last names.

In Hollywood, love is almost always depicted as shallow, instant, overwhelming, and effortless. We rarely see the hard work of love. We can't even call what we usually see in the movies love at all; it's just animal attraction. And we rarely see other forms of love: married love, friendship, or the love between siblings or parents and child. But these are the kinds of love that most of us are looking for.

And these are the kinds of love we see most often in the Bible. In a moment we'll look at them. But first we're going to look at the Bible's classic "definition" of love, in 1st Corinthians, chapter 13. We often associate these words with romantic love and hear them at weddings. But these words are meant to describe love wherever it's found—from God, among friends, in a family, or even between a human and a four-legged friend. Perhaps you've heard this once or twice or a thousand times before. Listen once more and compare this definition to what you might have seen at the movies lately. Beginning with verse 4:

Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never ends.

I Corinthians 13:4-8

That's quite a checklist, isn't it? I like St. Paul's definition, but it leaves me a little cold. It tells me what love *is*, but not what love *looks* like. I need a picture.

For that we have to turn to other parts of the Bible.

Jesus describes what love *is* by telling us what love *does*. When Jesus wants to teach about love that is patient, enduring, and kind, and keeps no record of wrongs, he tells a story of a man with two sons, one of whom hurts him terribly. What does real love look like? Jesus says, it looks like a father running down the road to hug the very same son who rejected him and all his values a long time before.

And instead of just *telling* us, The Book of Ruth *shows* us how love does not insist on its own way. Naomi and Ruth are in-laws whose husbands have died. There's no longer anything binding them together except their common desperation. Naomi knows that her daughter-in-law will be more able to re-marry without her in the mix. She makes the first loving move and tells Ruth to go on without her. Long before Sting sang about it, she knew the old adage, "If you love someone, set them free..." But that's precisely when Ruth says,

"Do not press me to leave you or to turn back from following you! Where you go, I will go; where you lodge, I will lodge; your people shall be my people, and your God my God. Where you die, I will die-- there will I be buried. May the LORD do thus and so to me, and more as well, if even death parts me from you!"

Ruth 1:16-17 NRSV

Naomi can't say, No, to Ruth's offer. Sometimes real love looks like two women, each trying to do the best for the other, and each finally saying that whatever happens, 'we're in this together'.

It's easy to find pictures in the Bible of God's love, family love, and love among friends. What we don't have a lot of pictures of is *married* love. With the exception of the book, *The Song of Solomon*, the writers of the Bible left out the romance. Yes, there are plenty of couples--Adam and Eve, Abraham and Sarah, Mary and Joseph—but not a lot of intimacy. Married love is most often presented as a partnership for the sake of producing kids.

Sometimes our marriages can feel like that, too. But that doesn't necessarily mean love has vanished. Sometimes real love looks deceptively mundane. Consider this scene from the musical, *Fiddler on the Roof*. Tevya and Golde have been together 25 years in an arranged marriage, when he announces:

(Tevye) “Golde, I have decided to give Perchik permission to become engaged to our daughter, Hodel.”

(Golde) “What??? He’s poor! He has nothing, absolutely nothing!”

(Tevye) “He’s a good man, Golde. I like him. And what’s more important, Hodel likes him. Hodel loves him. So what can we do? It’s a new world... A new world. Love. Golde, do you love me?”

(Golde) Do I what?

(Tevye) Do you love me?

(Golde) Do I love you? With our daughters getting married and this trouble in the town. You’re upset, you’re worn out. Go inside, go lie down! Maybe it’s indigestion.

(Tevye) Golde, I’m asking you a question... “Do you love me?”

(Golde) You’re a fool.

(Tevye) I know...But do you love me?

(Golde) Do I love you? For twenty-five years I’ve washed your clothes, cooked your meals, cleaned your house, given you children, milked the cow. After twenty-five years, why talk about love right now?

(Tevye) Golde, The first time I met you was on our wedding day. I was scared.

(Golde) I was shy.

(Tevye) I was nervous.

(Golde) So was I.

(Tevye) But my father and my mother said we’d learn to love each other, and now I’m asking: Golde, do you love me?

(Golde) I’m your wife!

(Tevye) I know...But do you love me?

(Golde) Do I love him? For twenty-five years I’ve lived with him, fought him, starved with him. Twenty-five years my bed is his. If that’s not love, what is?

(Tevye) Then you love me?

(Golde) I suppose I do.

(Tevye) And I suppose I love you too.

(Both) It doesn’t change a thing. But even so, after twenty-five years, it’s nice to know.

Tevye and Golde love each other in the Biblical sense, even if they don't get sweaty palms whenever they see each other.

Endurance isn't the essence of love, but sometimes it's the key to reaching the heights of love. In the Oscar Winning movie "A Beautiful Mind," John Nash, a brilliant Princeton economist, suffers from psychotic delusions and his life is spiraling into chaos. One day a mutual friend comes to check on his wife, Alicia and asks her,

"So Alicia, how, how are you holding up...I mean how are you?"

She responds in words that I suspect many who've been married many years have echoed aloud or in silence:

"I think often what I feel is obligation...or guilt...over wanting to leave.... [Anger] against John, against God...but then I look at him and I force myself to see the man that I married, and he becomes that man. He's transformed into someone that I love. And I'm transformed into someone who loves him. It's not all the time, but it's enough."

So often Hollywood depicts love as one delightful discovery after another and tells us that "love is never having to say you're sorry." [from the movie, "Love Story"] These caricatures of love are entertaining but dangerous. They subtly convince us that loving another person shouldn't be hard work. Misconceptions about love lead to enormous frustration and loneliness, because just as an opportunity to demonstrate real love is coming along we're walking out the door. "It's too hard," we think, "this can't be real love." But it is.

The Bible teaches that real love starts when you have to say you're sorry, or when you have to forgive your friend, or brother, or spouse who no longer delights you—and, in fact, has hurt you badly. Real love is so precious not because it's easy or because it's always fun, but because by God's grace we recognize that it's through loving another person fully—warts and all—through good times and bad—that we come to understand *God's* unconditional love for us.

Real love stretches us, strengthens us, and brings out the best in us. To paraphrase Jack Nicholson speaking to Helen Hunt in *As Good As it Gets*, real love “makes us want to become better men—or women.” Real love forces us to become better men and women... if we don’t give up. Don’t give up.

I’m not saying that we need to hang on at all costs to a relationship that is unhealthy. One of the ways we can use Paul’s definition of love is to help us see when we’re in a destructive relationship. I’ve heard plenty of young people tell me that the man or woman they are dating “is a great guy (or girl), but....” I tell them

- If they *aren’t* patient and kind
- If they *are* envious, arrogant, boastful or rude
- If they *insist* on their own way...

RUN!!!!!! Fast! You two may have something, but it ain’t real love. Get out while you can.

If Paul’s standard in 1st Corinthians 13 is God’s standard for love, we all fall short. It’s humbling, discouraging even, when I realize just how difficult it is to love well. But just because God’s standard is high, that doesn’t mean it’s impossible to find real love—in God, in others, or ourselves, if only for a few moments at a time.

There was one who came to live among us, one who *was* patient, kind, and enduring. A few years ago they made a pretty powerful movie about his life, it even sounds like a love story, doesn’t it: *The Passion of the Christ*. Because Jesus loved in this perfect way—because he *loves* us in this perfect way--we can draw on that love and do our best to love others in turn.

Look for love this week—in the Bible, in the movies, in your life—and thank God wherever and whenever you find it. Amen.

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