

EVERLASTING LOVE

Sermon 11/25/18

Today I want to talk about a lasting love – the kind of love that weathers the storms of life and stays committed despite the struggles that life and age bring to all of us. Since the early seventies couples started writing their own marriage vows. But in the olden days (like the days when most of us got married) there were set vows which included the words “*for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health, ‘till death do us part.*” This was the vow of love we made to each other as we stood before the preacher and the congregation or the justice of the peace and a few witnesses. We were so in love when we got married that we had every intention of keeping those vows. Yet life happens. Sickness can become a burden and the inability to pay the bills can put a strain on a marriage. Some people leave their spouses when they find they don’t have the stamina they thought they did to stick it out in the “poorer and worse” times of their life. Yet those who are truly committed find that despite what they may encounter along the way their love for one another is strong enough to overcome any obstacle. These marriages last as long as both spouses are alive. It is only in death that the bond is severed.

Such was the case for my wife’s mother and father. They were married for 44 years, had 8 kids who all followed the Lord, and had been retired for just a few short years before my wife’s mother was diagnosed with liver cancer. When we gathered for Thanksgiving back in 1982 Wendy’s mother was not feeling well. After the holiday she went to see a doctor and was told she only had a few weeks to live. She died within the month. Their marriage lasted 44 years, a long time in today’s society but not long enough in our eyes. When my wife asked her father if he was angry with God for talking his wife so soon he replied, “How can I ever be mad at God? He’s done more for me than I deserve by dying on the cross for my sins. I had 44 wonderful years with your mother. That was also more than I deserved.” Wendy’s dad had the right perspective on marriage and on the Lord. To him his wife was a gift the Lord had given to Him for a season. And so he echoed the words of Job who said, “*The Lord gives and the Lord takes away. Blessed be the name of the Lord.*”

Forty four years was a long time to be married yet Wendy and I have been married 46 years, two years longer than her parents. I’m sure some of you here have been married far longer than we have, perhaps 50 or even 60 years, or would have been if not for the death of your spouse. There aren’t many marriages that last as long as 70 years or more. But there are some exceptions. I want to mention two of them today.

The first is the marriage of Queen Elizabeth and Prince Phillip. They recently celebrated their 71st wedding anniversary. They were married on November 20, 1947, just two years after the end of World War II. She was a 21-year old princess and he was a 26-year old naval officer. It’s hard to believe today but according to Forbes magazine because Britain was still recovering from the war Princess Elizabeth had to collect clothing coupons for her dress like any other young bride. She must have collected a ton of coupons because her gown was decorated with crystals and 10,000 seeded pearls.

Today Queen Elizabeth is 92 years old and is England’s longest-reigning sovereign. Her husband, Prince Phillip, is 97 years old and is the longest-serving consort (the monarch’s spouse) in British history. Prince Harry said of his grandparents, “*The support my grandfather gives to my*

grandmother is phenomenal. Regardless of whether my grandfather seems to be doing his own thing, sort of wandering off like a fish down the river, the fact that he's there – I personally don't think that she could do it without him." These are two people who have weathered the storms of life together in a very public way, yet still remain committed to each other. In a world of no-fault divorce, easy shack-ups, and non-committed relationships, these two stand out far above the rest. Theirs is a love that has stood the test of time.

Sometimes the bond of love is so strong between couples that the death of one quickly results in the death of the other. Such was the story of Isabell and Preble Staver, the second couple I want to highlight today. They were married over 70 years ago on February 15, 1946 - five months after World War II had ended. They suffered a tragedy in 1975 when their son died playing football during the last game of his senior year of high school. Before that incident their daughter said their dad was sort of a "prickly pear". But after the death of their son she began to see a softer side of her dad. The death of their son really took a toll on her folks, she said, but it also brought them together. "Something like that can tear a couple apart, but they made a pact to get through it together. They really were each other's support team."

As they grew older Isabell got dementia and Preble stopped walking and was in a wheelchair. But he would wheel himself down to the Memory Care Unit and go and visit his wife. The first thing they would do was put their hands out and hold each other's hand and tell each other they loved each other. When Preble's 96th birthday approached he told his daughter that he'd like to have one more nap with Isabell, so she made arrangements with staff to set aside a room at the facility to make it happen. The couple laid beside each other for almost three hours, something they hadn't done since being placed in separate rooms.

A few days later their daughter got word that Isabell was approaching her final moments. So she rushed to the facility and brought her father to Isabell's room to say a final goodbye. He held her hand but soon had to let go. Preble and Isabell were born 14 days apart in October of 1921. Just 14 hours after Isabelle's death, at almost the midway point between their two birthdays, Preble passed away. Their daughter said she would always remember her parent's resilience through hardship. "*Sticking together was the foundation of their union. Mom and dad really lived out that if you make a commitment, even though life gets rough or life gets in the way, you work through life and you live life together.*"

But not everyone approaches life this way. Though we may initially approach relationships with abandon, when the trials and tests of life interrupt our union they put a strain on our relationship. For some this strain causes the union to break apart. For others it causes them to grow closer. My brother and his first wife had a child who died at childbirth. They were not prepared for such a great tragedy and did not know how to talk about their feelings. As a result they grew apart and their concern for one another grew cold. Soon they were divorced. I don't believe they loved each other any less. They just were incapable of sharing their love in the midst of a tragedy. They had no glue to hold them together, no God to heal their broken hearts. It was many, many years before my brother was willing to try again; many years of healing and many years of thinking in retrospect what went wrong. His was love that was lost because of tragedy.

There's an old poem written by Alfred Lord Tennyson in 1850 which contains a very

familiar phrase. It goes like this: *“I hold it true, whate’er befall; I feel it, when I sorrow most; ‘Tis better to have loved and lost than never to have loved at all.”* I’m sure Lord Tennyson did not come to this realization in the immediate aftermath of a lost love - none of us do. It takes time and perspective to see the beauty and value of something which we once clung so desperately to that has since escaped our grasp. The loss initially hurts and the pain infuses our being so much, especially in our youth, that we sometimes withdraw from life in order to protect ourselves from further hurt. Time can ease the pain, but it’s only when we are willing to look at love from a place of healing that we see the growth we incurred from the loss.

Suffice it to say that I had my share of lost loves in high school. To be honest most of these were really only one-sided attractions. And that’s why I had so many rejections. But I was not dissuaded because I had yet to mature to the point of looking for that special someone. When college came I thought I had found her. That’s when I started to write poems; poems about how in love I was (secretly of course) and how we were just meant for each other. I had no clue how what I was feeling was just puppy love and not real love until I let her read my poems. She was kind and let me down gently while informing me that she was in love with someone else. Ouch. That hurt. All hopes dashed, I carried my broken heart home only to wallow in what I thought I had lost. In reality I had never had anything from that relationship other than an infatuation. But it sure felt real to me and the pain that accompanied my rejection certainly did as well.

Of course we all mature at some point and it is at the point of truly knowing what love is - seeking after it wholeheartedly and then losing that love – that we begin to understand what Lord Tennyson was saying. It IS *“better to have loved and lost than never to have loved at all.”* Yes the pain of loss is great but the numbness of avoiding love at all costs in order to avoid the pain of rejection is greater still. It is far greater to have understood the depth of love and lost it, than it is to close yourself off from all feelings. Rejection hurts, loss hurts, but a self-imposed prison of protection that does not allow love to enter is far worse. We are made in God’s image and God Himself is love. When we close ourselves off to love we close ourselves off from God.

We all will certainly experience loss in life no matter how guarded we may become. We lose our parents, we lose our spouses, we lose friends, some, like my brother, even lose a child. We can lose a house, a car, our possessions, and our financial security. At some point nearly all of us will lose our health prior to death. If we never invested our time in friends or family we would be poor indeed. With few exceptions, all of us are richer for having family and friends by our side. We don’t close ourselves off because we may lose them some day. We embrace them for who they are now and enjoy the time we have with them because too soon they will be gone from us, or we from them. The legacy of time and energy invested in these relationships is all that will remain when we are parted. Better to have loved fully in those together moments than withhold our love and time for fear of losing them.

All of this is true of life on earth. But there is a far greater truth found in Scripture. It is found in Jeremiah 31:3 where the Lord says to Israel, *“I have loved you with an everlasting love.”* And it is found again in Hebrews 13:5 when God says, *“I will never desert you, nor will I forsake you.”* And it is echoed in the words of Jesus when he said, *“I will ask the Father, and He will give you another Helper, that He may be with you forever; that is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it does not see Him or know Him, but you know Him because He abides*

with you and will be in you. I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you. After a little while the world will no longer see me, but you will see Me; because I live, you will live also.”

When the Lord makes a promise He makes good on it. If He says He will never leave us He will never leave us. We may feel differently; we may feel like He has deserted or abandoned us; but our feelings do not reflect the truth. God’s word is truth not our feelings. What must it be like to the orphan who has been abandoned or the spouse who has been deserted by their marriage partner, or the one who has been mistreated by the world, to hear the words of God say to them, “Others may forsake you, others may abandon you and say all sorts of evil against you. But I will never leave you. I will always love you. My love is everlasting. My love is unending. Not even death can separate Me from you. My Spirit will live within you to comfort and guide you. I will whisper words of comfort to you and sing over you with love all the days of your life.”

Yet, as loving and kind as He is, even with the Lord we experience disappointment and tragedy. Bad things do happen to good people and evil does come our way even as God protects those who are His. Those beloved of God are ridiculed and even killed. The Christian life is not an easy life, especially for those who live in areas where persecution is the greatest. In America we are inconvenienced, even to the point of losing our source of income; but in other areas Christians are jailed, tortured, beheaded, and killed.

Does the Lord abandon those who experience such tragedy? Is the reason they were persecuted is because He removed His Spirit from them? No. God has promised never to desert or forsake His people. He does not leave them. He is with them in the midst of their trials and persecution. Just as He is with the divorced or widowed spouse, the grieving parent, the abandoned child, He is with those who are tortured and killed because of their faith in Him. God does not abandon His children. He is not a fair-weather Friend. His love does not waiver depending on the circumstance. His love is consistent, strong, and continuous.

Isaiah (43:2) reminds us of the strength and consistency of God’s love when He says, “*When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they will not overflow you. When you walk through the fire, you will not be scorched, nor will the flame burn you.*” And Jesus reminds us that “*In this world you will have tribulation, but be of good cheer. I have overcome the world*” (John 16:33).

Certainly Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego were able to walk through the fire without being burned. Moses and Joshua and the Israelites were also able to pass through the waters and walk through the rivers safely. But, as we know all too well, there have been many people here in California who have attempted to walk through the fire hoping not to be burned; instead lost their lives as they attempted to escape the raging infernos around them. We have seen this in the Carr fire near Redding where a grandmother and her two grandchildren attempted to escape the flames surrounding them. We’ve also seen it in the town of Paradise where people even had to leave their vehicles because there was so much fire and smoke. Unfortunately these people did not escape but were overcome with smoke as they attempted to walk, run and drive through the fire. They walked through the fire but were scorched and burned by it. So what does this Scripture really mean?

It means that no matter what happens to us in this life God will not abandon us. Yes, we may

lose our possessions in a fire, we may even lose our own life or the lives of those we love; but that is no indication of God's abandonment. God has promised never to leave or forsake us and He will always be faithful to His word. He will walk through the fire with us. He may lead us through the fire to another temporary dwelling place on earth or He may lead us out of the fire to our permanent dwelling place in heaven. But wherever He leads He will not abandon us along the way. His love is everlasting even in the midst of the terrible.

There is much in this world that we do not understand, much that we do not know – such as how we can walk through the fire and not be scorched. There are mysteries that belong to God which He keeps to Himself, and there are mysteries which He has openly revealed to us. One of the greatest mysteries that has been revealed is this: *“I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor any other created thing, will be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.”*

Try as they might to sever the bonds of love between God and His creation, they cannot. The love of God is far stronger than any other created thing. It is an everlasting love. Nothing can separate us from that undying love. Unbelief may prevent this love from overwhelming the darkness in our lives; but belief in His Son brings that love to life and keeps it shining in the midst of triumph as well as tragedy. John tells us this is true when he says, *“Whoever confesses that Jesus is the Son of God, God abides in him, and he in God. We have come to know and have believed the love which God has for us. God is love, and the one who abides in love abides in God, and God abides in Him”* (1 John 4:15-16).

Even in the immortal words of Alfred Lord Tennyson Scriptural truth can be found; for it is better to suffer the loss of all things and retain the love of God than it is to gain the whole world and lose our very soul. The love of God is worth far more than the riches of earth. As the song goes, *“Turn your eyes upon Jesus. Look full in His wonderful face. And the things of earth will grow strangely dim, in the light of His glory and grace.”*

As we celebrate this season of thanksgiving let us be thankful for the love of God and that this love is not something which comes and goes but stays with us through the trials of life. Even in our weakest moment and our most desperate hour, in our greatest loss and our most fearful time, God remains a faithful lover of our soul. We do not know what tomorrow holds; but we do know that the One who loves us with an everlasting love also holds tomorrow in His hand.

So whether we are approaching the valley of rejoicing or the valley of the shadow of death He will be with us, holding our hand and guiding us through both the triumph and tragedies of life. Like Isabel and Preble the Lord will lay down with us on our death bed and hold our hand while He ushers us into eternity. Like Queen Elizabeth and Prince Phillip He will remain faithful to us through the long years of our life and be our constant companion. And, like Wendy's dad, God can cause us to be thankful even when we lose the very thing we are thankful for.

Regardless of the difficulties we experience in life the Lord is always there, never leaving or forsaking us. We could not do life without Him. His is truly an everlasting love – a love that will not cease to be after death but will follow us into eternity. Instead of turning away from God when we

experience difficulty and loss in life, we should echo the words of my father-in-law when he said, “How can I be mad at God for the things that have happened to me? He’s already done more for me than I deserve by dying on the cross and forgiving my sin.” We can be thankful even when we lose the very one on earth we are thankful for; Why? Because the one who said He would never leave or forsake us had an everlasting love for us which will outlast and overcome death itself. This is not simply an everlasting love. This is an eternal love – an amazing, wonderful, and marvelous love that comes from God the Father through Jesus, our great Savior, to us. This Thanksgiving let us all be thankful that we have personally come to know the everlasting love which God has for each of us. Amen.

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