

Movies, music, and visual art - novels, plays and poetry; each of these take their turn trying to explain love to us. Scientists have weighed in too (why should the artists have all the fun) with their attempt to reduce the complexities of love to chemical reactions in the brain. We give time to therapists and analysts when love grows cold — we favour mediation and negotiation when relationships go south - but for all that we still don't seem to have a handle on it. Love.

It is, according to the poets and greeting card companies, what makes the world go round; a many splendored thing. We know love most keenly by its absence - and we invest the idea of true love with all sorts of unreasonable expectations. For my part, I've read this passage from Paul (and written short meditations on it) for dozens of weddings, each one more hopeful than the last. Our quest for love never ends.

And that's where Paul's approach is unique. Human history treats love as a prize - the best choice in life's lottery of emotions. Paul writes of love as the greatest of the Spiritual gifts, and that changes everything.

As Paul urges his audience to be aware of the work of the Spirit among them, he runs through what we consider to be the standard catalogue of spiritual gifts; "And God has appointed in the church first apostles, second prophets, third teachers; then deeds of power, then gifts of healing, forms of assistance, forms of leadership, various kinds of tongues." (1 Cor 12: 28). Paul expands on this list as the situation demands, but here he offers the most comprehensive explanation of a Spiritual gift. Love is...patient, kind, humble, cooperative, gentle, honest, resilient, faithful, hopeful, enduring. We are not given such a robust explanation of the gift of preaching - or prophecy.

So what does it mean - this spiritual approach to love? Will it re-write our history? Render centuries of art meaningless? Crush the life out of high-school dances? Hardly. Our emotions will not be that easily dismissed, and love is always going to bear certain emotional burdens. But Paul would remind us that this emotion comes from that part of our being that is God breathed. Without dragging us back to the beginning, Paul understands that we all bear the image of God, and in giving the gift of the Spirit, that divine spark in us is re-ignited. And for all the good God's Spirit offers us - the ability to love becomes (for Paul) the necessity; everything else proceeds from love.

When I read this at a wedding, people get starry-eyed, and they lean in closer. I know, because I'm one of them. Paul's treatise on love was one of the Scriptures at our wedding. But back then I imagined that Paul was talking about us - about Lea and I building a life together. It was personal and practical advice to our 21 yr old selves, and we were glad to take it. And don't get me wrong, a marriage that nurtures the kind of love that Paul describes - even if only at an emotional level - is likely to be a good marriage. But Paul is not concerned about marriages. Paul has met Jesus, and Jesus has invited Paul to change the world. And that requires divine intervention - the Spirits help - and that's what Paul is talking about.

One Spirit we are given - and one body with many parts has been called into service. But the foundations of that spirit are in the agape that Paul spends so much time on. For if this is what the Spirit is like, then imagine what the world might be - consider the kingdom that Jesus calls our attention to; a kingdom ushered in by the Spirit's work, and founded on the

Spirit's values - variously described as the "Kingdom of God", or "the year of the Lord's favour", or the "Reign of Christ"...If indeed the Spirit is among us - if we are the head, shoulders, knees and toes of the body of Christ, then two things are clear to Paul - the kingdom is upon us, and it is a kingdom of love.

Sadly, two thousand years on from Paul's writing, we are not there yet. Our singers ask "what's love got to do with it?" Our governments act according to poorly defined self-interests. Technology takes us physically further from one another, and things like compassion, humility, cooperation and honesty seem harder and harder to find. Paul's plea to seek the most excellent way - to claim the first among many wonderful gifts of the Spirit - is as earnest today as when it was first written. His argument for love - based on his encounter with the risen, glorious Jesus - is one we need to hear, and not just at the occasional wedding. If we dare to call ourselves Christians, Paul's understanding of love should be worked into our daily living - this definition of love as a gift from God ought to form us and inform our words and actions. We ought to trade our political slogans in for this portion of 1 Corinthians at roadside protests and in coffee shop conversations.

Let us take up the argument for love as a gift from God and let the chips fall where they may.