

s-Epiph4C-10-When Love is Found  
1 Corinthians 1-13 *Love, the greatest gift*  
Philippians 2:1-11 "*Make my joy complete*" (not Lection)  
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14 February 2010 (not Lection date – Valentine's Day)

## WHEN LOVE IS FOUND

They say that love makes the world go 'round. Today is Valentine's Day, a day for romance. My husband and I don't make a big deal of it—we tend to resist "Hallmark holidays" and the pressure to run out and buy something neither of us needs. Actually, my fondest memories of Valentine's Day are from my grammar school days, when everybody in class would receive a little valentine from everyone else, and the teacher would give us a marshmallow heart to devour on the way home from school.

Still, Valentine's Day is for romance, and we can't ignore something as important as that! In fact, romance is what I want to talk about today. I'm sure you're aware that the legal challenge to Proposition 8 is before the Supreme Court right now. You know where I stand on this issue, and you probably also know *why* I'm in favor of marriage equality.

It's first and foremost a civil rights issue. That seems very clear to me.

The January 18<sup>th</sup> issue of *Newsweek* featured an article about "The Conservative Case for Gay Marriage." This sounds like an oxymoron: aren't conservatives the ones who are dead-set against marriage equality? Not necessarily so!

Ted Olson is one of the most prominent Republicans in Washington, and perhaps the most formidable conservative lawyer in the country. As head of the Office of Legal Council under Ronald Regan, he argued—and won—many cases on behalf of equal protection under the law in regards to preference in schools and hiring. He was an advisor in the impeachment of Bill Clinton, and was victorious on behalf of George W. Bush in the Supreme Court in *Bush v. Gore*, and served as Bush's solicitor general. The man's got credentials.

Now back in private practice, Olson is dismaying many of his conservative friends and colleagues by taking on *Perry v. Schwarzenegger*, the federal case challenging Prop 8, the California ballot initiative that outlawed same-sex marriage after it was legalized earlier.

Olson's brief is straightforward: laws banning gay marriage make no sense and are unconstitutional. As a conservative, he believes in individual liberty and freedom from government interference in the private lives of citizens. In other words, he's being accused by the Right of being a hypocrite, when in fact he is exactly the opposite. He has been wonderfully consistent throughout his decades of legal work, and his argument that same-sex marriage is an American value is well-stated and thoughtful. It's about equal protection under the laws and our inalienable right to "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness."

Our legal right to the pursuit of happiness as free, equal, romantic Americans has collided like a freight train with certain religious beliefs and learned attitudes that are far from universal. Mr. Olson believes, and I believe, that common sense and our American preference for the happy ending of every romance will prevail. Love makes the world go 'round. Love makes *our* world go 'round.

Most of us cannot really imagine a world where two people who are discovering the exquisite experience of realizing that they've found "the one," can't do anything public about it.

How many of us wanted to shout from the rooftops like a singer in a Broadway show when we first realized we were in love? How many of us think of our wedding day as one of the happiest days of our lives? How many of us have benefited from society's belief that marriage is sacred, worth all the trouble, till death do us part? Now imagine that world. Imagine what it would be like keep all that joy to yourself. To have to pretend that this whole immense part of your life didn't exist, had to be kept under wraps, never celebrated openly, even though you were actually fulfilling an expectation of society? This is a world that is reality for 10% of the human race!

We tend to think that marriage has always been the same institution that it is today, and furthermore that our Western model is universal. That's natural, because this is the type of marriage we're used to and see all around us. But this was not always the case, and still is not in many parts of the world.

The early Christian Church made a distinction between two kinds of love. There's *agape* love, which is what we once referred to brotherly love; in other words, platonic love such as we have for family and friends and *should* have for our neighbors. And then there is *eros*, or romantic love. Our Christian traditions are centered on *agape* love, because it's so very important to our belief in equality before God and the importance of service.

Jesus' world was a Hellenistic world; Judea was occupied by Rome at that time. Romantic love got short shrift because it really wasn't a big part of Hellenistic culture. In those days, marriage was something that was arranged for financial or practical reasons. The idea of "falling in love" didn't have much to do with it. Marrying for love is a fairly new concept, believe it or not.

In Jesus' day, virtually all marriages were arranged. This was true for everybody, Jews and Romans alike. The purpose of marriage was to have children and to run a household efficiently. All that was expected out of marriage, really, was mutual respect and loyalty. Love often developed over the course of a couple's years together, but that was an added benefit. *Agape* love was perfectly adequate. Romance was a fantasy for most married people, something that could create more problems than it was worth.

In our modern western culture we don't arrange marriages any more, although it's not been long since that was the model. Nowadays, we prefer to think that every couple marries for *love, sweet love*. Romance is important to us. We encourage it, celebrate it, include it in almost every book or movie or popular song. If you want your story to have a happy ending, you bring two lovers together. If you want to make us bring out our handkerchiefs, then make those lovers star-crossed, doomed to never fulfill the potential of their romance. Even cultures in places like India or the Middle East where arranged marriage is still the norm, people tend to idealize romantic love. Yes, indeed. Love makes the world go 'round—especially our modern world.

Sociologists believe that the institution of marriage, whether civil or religious, is a beneficial development in human social evolution. We believe it makes for stable families and healthier relationships, and research shows that it even helps us live longer. Marriage is good for society and for individuals. Married couples get a lot of support from friends and family. They also enjoy the support of their community at large and our whole society. So it seems counter-intuitive to me to restrict this supportive, community-enhancing institution of marriage to one classification of people. Everybody loves romance, and, as the song says, everybody needs somebody sometime!

Don't you love to attend weddings and anniversary celebrations? I love romance, but even more I love the way two people can come together as equals and partners in an enterprise that they expect will last their whole lives through. We all know, of course, it doesn't always work out that way. Married couples struggle and fight and worry and face hardship and sometimes their relationships don't survive. But isn't wonderful that we all agree it's worth a try? Let's clear the path for any loving covenant.

Cathleen Falsani, author of the new book *The Dude Abides: The Gospel According to the Cohen Brothers*, touches on this theme of romance in the February issue of *Sojourners Magazine*. Her essay is entitled, "Perfect Love." She was asked to read something at the wedding of some special friends, and she chose a passage from the whimsical novel *Still Life with Woodpecker*. One member of the romantic duo in this love story wrote this to the other: "People are never perfect, but love can be... loving makes love. Loving makes itself. We waste time looking for the perfect lover instead of creating the perfect love. Wouldn't that be the way to make love stay?" And the letter of reply: "Love is the ultimate outlaw. It just won't adhere to any rules. The most any of us can do is to sign on as its accomplice. Instead of vowing to honor and obey, maybe we should swear to aid and abet. That would mean that security is out of the question. The words 'make' and 'stay' become inappropriate. My love for you has no strings attached. I love you for free."

"I love you for free." Does that remind you of something Jesus said?

Bruce Bawer, in his wonderful 1993 book, *A Place At the Table*, recalls his return to the church and how it came to be:

*Over the first few weeks during which I warily accompanied Chris to church, I came to understand exactly how wrong I had been about homosexuality and Christian faith. Gradually I came to see that Chris's and my love for each other, far from being inconsistent with Christianity, was in fact the supreme testament in my own life to Christ's love. Our love made me feel to the depths of my spirit the truth of Christianity, the truth of the proposition that we were placed here, above all, to love and praise; it made me understand that human life is a reflection of divine love and that love is at the heart of the meaning of everything. When, in November of 1990, I was baptized at our church in New York City, Chris served as one of my two sponsors. If I had fallen away from Christ because of my homosexuality, it was my homosexuality that led me back into the fold.*

I want to conclude this little love letter by mentioning one of my favorite authors. Oscar Wilde was tremendously popular during the late 1800's. He wrote novels, poems, plays—like the delightful "The Importance of Being Earnest"—and some truly wonderful children's stories like "The Happy Prince." Wilde was known for his witty conversation and his wry observations of people and their behavior; he was a genuine literary celebrity. But despite his reputation for cleverness, his writing reveals that this sophisticated, intellectual dandy deeply understood the purpose and nature of love. Oscar Wilde died, disgraced and impoverished, in 1900... incarcerated in an English prison for the dreadful crime of being in love with another man.

Despite his suffering, he was able to hold onto his sense of the reality and importance of love—both the agape love of the Christian and the erotic love of the human being. From prison he wrote:

*And while in reading the Gospels... I see also that to Christ imagination was simply a form of Love and that to him Love was Lord in the fullest meaning of the phrase. Some six weeks*

*ago I was allowed by the Doctor to have white bread to eat instead of the coarse black or brown bread of ordinary prison fare. It is a great delicacy. To you it will sound strange that dry bread could possibly be a delicacy to anyone. I assure you that to me it is so much so that at the close of each meal I carefully eat whatever crumbs may be left on my tin plate, or have fallen on the rough towel one uses as a cloth so as not to soil one's table: and so not from hunger—I get now quite sufficient food—but simply in order that nothing should be wasted of what is given to me. So one should look on love.*

Not one crumb of love in the world should be wasted. It is the best thing we all know; the most desirable thing we all want. It makes the world go 'round. Some day soon, I hope, we will disentangle our messy human interference into what we all agree is something good and important in life, and look upon all people through God's eyes, through Love's eyes.

I'll accept Valentine's Day as a national holiday when everybody honestly loves a lover, and romance is open to all. Amen.

#### PRAYER:

Great God, we are told that you are love itself—that all love comes from you and returns to you. We are taught that love is our highest good, whether it be love for neighbor or love for spouse, or, especially, love for you. May we, and all people, be open to the teaching that love should always be strengthened and supported, encouraged and pursued, and that this is a way to build your kingdom and serve your people and do your will on earth—as it is in heaven.

Let us never back down where you have set us to stand, even if it means we face opposition, anger, or even a cross. This is Jesus' example to us. Amen.

#### RESOURCES:

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