

The Rev. Julia A. Fritts

Holy God, may only your Word be spoken; only your Word heard.+ Amen.

Our Epistle today is a reading that we have heard many, many times, especially if you have attended a lot of weddings. Paul's first letter to the Early Church in Corinth is a letter about real love: what real love is, and what real love is not. This love letter has served as a guide to brides and grooms for hundreds and hundreds of years, who have chosen it to be read on their wedding day – that most special day of all, when life is so beautiful, and the future is full of hope. White lace and roses, gold rings and that first kiss as husband and wife. Wedding days are precious; the beauty and ritual stand as symbols of who we hold one another to be: worthy and loved beyond measure. Just as our Episcopal liturgy is meant to give us a glimpse of the kingdom of heaven, wedding day traditions allow us to see one another through the eyes of the beloved: beautiful; worthy; precious.

It is on this beautiful day that so many couples hear the words that Paul wrote. He said, "*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.*" Real love is what every bridal couple is sure of. And real love, according to Paul, looks like this.

But we know that real life – even for that bride and groom – will look a little bit different in the day to day press of life. Real love, in real life, can look a whole lot different. I think sometimes that brides and grooms should consider getting married in their sweatpants and slippers, with a bad case of bedhead, just to honor the truth that real life doesn't usually involve a whole lot of white lace or matched cummerbunds. Real love *is* absolutely a matter of the heart. But real love in real life is, perhaps more importantly, a matter of the heart that has hands and feet on. Real love is, as Paul says, patient, and kind. Real love rejoices in the truth. Real love bears all things. Believes all things. Hopes all things. Endures all things. And real love never ends. Real love is what Jesus Christ taught; it is what Paul was trying to help the Early Church to live out in real life. And real love, in real life, with hands and feet on, is what I have been witnessing these past days and weeks since the devastating earthquake in Haiti.

Two hundred thousand lives lost, and counting. Hundreds of thousands, injured. Orphaned. Our sisters and brothers, our nephews and nieces, our elders and grandbabies - wandering in pain and loss, living without shelter, now sick and dying with dysentery. We are all heartsick to see the beautiful, resilient, strong people of Haiti – all of us together the Family of God – devastated like this, and we pour out our hearts in help. We feel this compulsion, this need, to do *something*, to do *anything* that could help, don't we? This compelling impulse to help is *the real love* that Jesus teaches us, that Paul talks about. It is in fact the very power of the Holy Spirit herself, moving through us, and we see and

hear of examples every day of these outpourings of generosity, this love with hands and feet on.

I had the great honor of meeting the second team of Medical Missioners who gathered here at our church in preparation for their trip to Haiti this past week. These were very regular looking folks. Women and men, all talented in their respective medical professions, just standing around chatting with that sort of nervous idling that we do when we're about to embark on something big. Regular people, who put their regular lives on hold to leave their families and their familiar comforts and head off to Haiti, where the world is literally broken and turned upside down; where the cries and the stench and the devastation will be inconceivable. I felt clearly that I was in the presence of saints, talking with this group, and I was struck by their beauty, their humility, and their quiet strength. I'm sure in regular life they wore the customary gear of the medical elite, but here they may as well have been in sweatpants and slippers with their bedheads on, ready just as they were to step forward into a very hard place, where real love was needed. Offering them a blessing, I saw in each of them the regal beauty of their lineage, these children of God.

I've been reading a wonderful book (thank you, Karen!) which talks about the earthiness of life in ministry. It speaks of the everyday experiences we all encounter – that holding of the sense of the sacred in the presence of the earthy unpleasantnesses of life on earth – in the nursing home, the hospital, the shelter, the street. Ministry – that is, being an ambassador of Christ's love in the world – is a terribly earthy business, as so many of St. John's folks know. We have a large contingent of caregivers among us, and you all know what I mean by the earthiness of ministry. For a clergy person, it's definitely not a life that much resembles the beauty of ordination day: like the couple on their wedding day, real life is not carried out so much in the finery of satin chasubles or white lace. Real life, and real love, are carried out in down-to-earth efforts like the coordination of a phone call and email avalanche into an organized mission. It is found in the intense quiet of the WalMart shopper, trying to fit more diapers and pedialyte into their cart for the children of Haiti, grieving that it can never be enough. Real love is the person collecting containers to carry the gasoline, generously donated to run the generators in Haiti. Real love is in the glorious mountains of stuffed luggage prepared for the Missioners to wheel to the clinic in Carrefour. Real love is in the generous check written out, right there on the spot. Real love is in the thousands of bottles of breastmilk pumped by American mothers for the babies of Haiti. Real love is in the offering of airliners to provide free transport to Missioners. And real love is in the outpouring of your prayers, and that compelling need to not let the people of Haiti become forgotten in the press of life going on over time. These are all manifestations of the Holy Spirit putting feet and hands and hearts to work for the sake of the other, and it is in these faces of the missioners and relief workers, caked with dust and cut with rubble, that I see the regal beauty of the

precious bride and the newly ordained priest, the Kingdom of God peeking through. Listen again through the missionaries ears to Paul's letter to the Corinthians:

*“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.”*

My fervent prayer is that this outpouring of love to the people of Haiti endures, and does not slow to a trickle and fade away. There may be a few hearts still barely beating under the rubble, 19 days now after the earthquake, and yet already the news headlines carry no mention of Haiti. Two hundred thousand lives lost; more thousands now without shelter and desperate, and nothing in the headlines - only 19 days after the fact. Where is the love? Will we fall prey to some convenient amnesia, and lose our passion for helping Haiti? I pray that our love will continue to be real love – that the Holy Spirit can continue to compel us - to offer help and love that bears, believes, hopes, and endures all things.

Not everyone gets the chance to experience ordination, or the wedding of their dreams. Not every ministry or marriage grows into the full expression of love that Jesus wants for us, and that Paul describes - white lace and roses and satin chasubles may be no match for the earthy strain of real life. But real love is something we can all cultivate in our lives. Living into our full stature as worthy, precious, beautiful, and beloved of God is a way of moving through life that we can all practice – no white lace, or cummerbund, or chasuble needed! When you hear the call, say yes! When the Holy Spirit moves you to help, stand up! Allow the love of Jesus Christ to move you into action, and be his hands and his feet. Be his love moving in the world today: incarnational, earthy, real love. And let us make sure that our real love, our help, bears, believes, hopes, and endures all things. Let us have the endurance and commitment to stand for the rebuilding of Haiti, where life was utterly broken open, but where the future can now be rebuilt: a place where the strong, beautiful faces of our sisters and brothers there can shine again with hope. As Paul concluded, *“Love never ends.”* Let this be true. This is my prayer.

Amen.

The Rev. Julia A. Fritts

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