

I can't tell you how many times I've heard that second reading – Paul's classic description of love. It's used in about 95% of weddings. It's very poetic, flows so easily from the lips, and sounds so nice. It's just lovely until . . . until you really look and think about what it says.

It is an appropriate reading on this 4<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time, as we continue to explore how deeply God loves us. Two weeks ago the primary images of the readings were wedding images: God came to earth because he wanted to be wedded to humankind. Last week the readings were about community – God loves us in the context of the community of the Church. Today, Paul talks to the Corinthians, and to us, about what love *really* is!

When Paul wrote to the Corinthians, he didn't intend it to refer to the love between husband and wife – although it certainly applies. He intended it as a description of the love that God has for us, and how we, therefore, are called to love one another.

Fr. Bill Bausch has some great lines on love in one of his homilies on this text. He writes: "The word love has been co-opted by Madison Avenue to sell us products that, they promise, will deliver love. Love, according to them, is to be found in cologne, chocolates, and roses. In media land, love is equated with sex, and the one with the most cosmetic surgeries, makeovers, clothes, cars, implants, and a year's supply of Viagra

wins. And so there they are, young people on TV, selling themselves around the approved criteria of being lots of fun, a swinger, fond of fondue and funky rock, judging one another on looks and sex appeal, and declaring they're in love."

He goes on to say: "Such love, defined as surface glitz and 'personality,' is shallow and no love at all. It is as far from real love as you can get. The fact is, love is not in the feelings or the glands, although they are important, and a marriage without sentiment and sex is a poor one. But the point is they are not primary. They do not ultimately define love. Love is in the will, in the decisions we make, and the harder the decision, in spite of the feelings, the greater the love. Love can operate, often does operate, when feelings are fearful, timid, or sad." The Russian writer Dostoevsky has perhaps the best line on love: "Love in action is a harsh and dreadful thing. . ."

Listen again to how Paul talks about love: "Love is patient. It is not jealous, not pompous, not rude, does not seek its own interests, is not quick-tempered, does not brood over injury. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things."

Does that sound easy? To do it requires an act of the will – sometimes going directly contrary to our feelings. It's a decision we make for the good of the other.

Bausch goes on to give several very powerful examples of love.

Sydney Carton, the alcoholic lawyer in Dickens' *Tale of Two Cities*, heroically takes the place of another at the guillotine, and Dickens has him say: "It is a far, far better thing that I do, than I have ever done." His decision to do this is love.

The Polish Franciscan, Saint Maximilian Kolbe, in a Nazi concentration camp, steps forward to die in the place of another – a husband and father. That's love!

Karl Downs, a pastor in Oakland, California, died at an early age of a heart attack. A number of years before that, he was asked by Juvenile Court to take responsibility for a young man who was always getting into trouble. With some misgivings, he accepted the responsibility, and became a substitute father for that boy. No one remembers Karl Downs, but everyone remembers the name of that boy: Jackie Robinson, the first African-American to play major league baseball, an outstanding athlete and a good man.

Martin Luther King was a seriously flawed man, yet his love for his people and his thirst for justice led him to express that love in a harsh and dreadful way: He knew he would be killed. "We have some difficult days ahead," he said, "but it doesn't matter with me now. Because I've been to the moutaintop. I just want to do God's will. I'm not fearing any man." His feelings were feelings of apprehension. His decision was to love. And it cost him.

And, of course, the highest authority: “Greater love than this no one has than to lay down his life for his friend.” That’s what Jesus did; we see the beginning of it in today’s gospel. “All spoke highly of him, and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth.” Then he spoke the truth to them – the truth about how lacking they were in their faith in God, a truth they needed to hear. And by the end of the gospel: “they rose up, drove him out of the town,” and tried to hurl him headlong over the cliff.

Love is in the mind, in the will, in the decisions we make. Feelings are wonderful and necessary, and they embellish love and we would be enormously poorer without them, but they should not be identified with love. They should not be identified with the decision to do what is best for the beloved.

Love is patient, not quick-tempered. Love is kind, not rude, and does not brood over injuries. Love endures all things, and does not seek its own interest. And above all: love never fails! That’s how God loves us!