



From the Pulpit: November 12, 2023

Thirty-second Sunday in Ordinary Time

The Reverend Dr. William A. Evertsberg

I Corinthians 13:6; Daniel 3:13–30

The Greatest of These, IX: Integrity

This is the tenth and last of a sermon series called *The Greatest of These* about Saint Paul's paeon to love in I Corinthians 13

It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

Love never ends. For we know only in part, and we prophesy only in part, but when the complete comes, the partial will come to an end. When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became an adult, I put an end to childish ways. For now we see only a reflection, as in a mirror, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known. And now faith, hope, and love remain, these three, and the greatest of these is love.

I have to admit I'm a little relieved.

Relieved?!!! Why?

Well I thought it'd be something a lot worse.

Worse? What could be worse than the total agony of hopeless love?

“love is so precious
because it is
immortal.”

Well, yes. I see your point.

Later in the film the boy and his stepfather decide to pursue this hopeless love-interest despite the near certainty of total futility. Liam Neeson says, “Let’s go get the crap kicked out of us by love.”

In the film *Love Actually*, Liam Neeson’s geeky little 10-year-old stepson Sam is having a horrible semester at his London school. First his mother dies, and then he falls hopelessly in love with the most beautiful, talented, and popular girl in the entire school, who of course isn’t aware that he exists.

Joan Crawford said, “Love is a fire, but whether it will warm your hearth or burn your house down, you can never really tell.”¹

He doesn’t quite know how to solve this problem, so he mopes around the house in a huge black funk. Liam Neeson, his clueless and also broken-hearted stepfather, who’s just lost his wife, doesn’t know what to do, how to get his stepson out of his dolor. The father thinks the son is depressed because his mother just died, but of course **love** is much worse than **death**.

It is our greatest joy and our greatest regret, our greatest meaning, our greatest purpose, our greatest goal. It is what we crave more than anything else in life.

Finally Liam Neeson asks his stepson what’s wrong:

Sam says, Do you really want to know?

Yes, I really want to know.

Even if there’s nothing you can do about it?

Even if there’s nothing I can do about it.

I’m in love.

Visible look of relief on the father’s face; audible sigh of reprieve.

Paul knows this, so in I Corinthians 13, he dissects the common concept of love into its constituent parts to tell us why it is life’s greatest gift. Love is patient, he says. Love is kind, he says. Love is never envious or arrogant or boastful or rude, he says.

But he saves the best for last. Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things endures all things. Love never ends. Most of all, love is so precious because it is immortal.

Paul’s paeon to love is exactly 13 verses and 296 words

¹Mardy Grothe, *i never metaphor i didn't like* (New York: HarperCollins, 2008), p. 162.

long, but you can sum it up in three words: Love is long.

True Love is invincible. True Love is imperishable. I tell my brides and grooms: Illness doesn't defeat love; new infatuations don't defeat love; diverging career paths don't defeat love. Your partner's maddening idiosyncrasies don't defeat love. Love is longer than life itself, and stronger than death. The Song of Songs in the Hebrew Bible says "Love is beautiful as fire and stronger than death." Yes? Beautiful as fire and stronger than death.

Morrie Schwartz says, "Death ends a **life**, not a **relationship**."² Death ends a life, not a relationship. We don't stop loving the beloved when we lose her to the grave; she is with us still.

On Veterans' Day weekend, I have to mention the greatest love letter a soldier has ever written to his beloved back home.

Sullivan Ballou served with the Rhode Island militia in the Union Army during the Civil War. He wrote several letters a week to his wife, including this one on July 14, 1861:

*If I do not return to you, my dear Sarah, never forget how much I love you, and when my last breath escapes me on the battle field, it will whisper your name. If the dead can come back to this earth and flit unseen around those they loved, I shall always be near you; in the gladdest days and in the darkest nights . . . always, always, and if there be a soft breeze upon your cheek, it shall be my breath, as the cool air fans your throbbing temple, it shall be my spirit passing by. Sarah, do not mourn me dead; think I am gone and wait for thee, for we shall meet again.*³

Sarah never received that letter, or at least not till much

²Morrie Schwartz, in *Tuesdays with Morrie*, by Mitch Albom (New York: Doubleday, 1997), p. 174.

³Quoted by Ken Burns, in the film *The Civil War*, <https://www.pbs.org/kenburns/the-civil-war/sullivan-ballou-letter>

later. Judge Advocate Ballou was killed in The Battle of Bull Run on July 21, 1861, seven days after he wrote that letter. It was found among his personal belongings days later when they retrieved his body from the battlefield.

Sullivan was 32. Sarah was 24. They'd been married for six years. They had two sons. Sarah and Sullivan are buried next to each other in Providence, Rhode Island. *Sarah, do not mourn me dead; think I am gone and wait for thee, for we shall meet again.*

"Love is beautiful
as fire and stronger
than death."

"For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known." That's an unexpected image in this context, isn't it? A mirror?

Why does Paul use that image?

In the first century, the city of Corinth was known for its mirrors. In the Roman Empire, Corinth was to mirrors what Detroit is to cars and New York to books and Hollywood to movies. Corinth was the mirror capital of the Empire.

But mirrors in the first century weren't like the black-backed glass mirrors we know. Did you know that the mirror we know wasn't invented till 1835? For thousands of years, mirrors were hammered, polished disks of bronze or another metal. The image they reflected was, as Paul puts it, "dim," and wavy, a poor facsimile of the original. Back then, you couldn't really know anything about a person's face by looking in a mirror.

Which is a shame, because we all want to be seen. We all want to be known. We all want to be cherished for who we are.

David Brooks writes about an "epidemic of invisibility" in America just now. He interviews multiple people who feel unseen and disrespected. Black people are invisible to white people, and rural people are unseen by coastal elites.⁴ We feel diminished when we're unseen; we feel small.

⁴David Brooks, "How to Be Human," *The New York Times*, October 19, 2023.

Paul knows about the “epidemic of invisibility” in this imperfect world of uncertain knowledge and dim reflections, and he promises us a grander, fuller life in the world that is to come. Now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then face to face. Now we know only in part; then we shall know fully, even as we are fully known. God will see us for who we are, through the lens of unconditional grace, and know us fully, and cherish us despite our flaws and frailties. We shall know and see and love each other, face to face, no wavy reflections.

Is anybody reading Ann Patchett’s new novel *Tom Lake*? I can’t believe I live in a world where I get to read *Tom Lake*. It’s set—get this—it’s set in a cherry orchard, during the cherry harvest, near Petoskey, Michigan, just across Grand Traverse Bay from where I spend August in Northport. It’s so beautiful, the location and the book.

The main characters are middle-aged, but they all met when they were in their 20s while performing in a production of Thornton Wilder’s *Our Town*.

They all play The Stage Manager, and George, and Emily: “This is the way we were in the provinces north of New York at the beginning of the twentieth century. This is the way we were: in our growing up and in our marrying and in our living and in our dying.”

“Oh, Mama, just look at me one minute as though you really saw me. Let’s look at one another... Oh, earth, you’re too wonderful for anybody to realize you. Do any human beings ever realize life while they live it?—every, every minute?” It was like Ms. Patchett wrote this novel just for me.

Where did Ann Patchett get the idea for a novel set in a cherry orchard near Petoskey? In 2001, she was traveling the country promoting her novel *Bel Canto*, and her publisher wanted her to do a signing and reading at a bookstore in Petoskey.

She didn’t want to go. It meant she had to fly to Detroit from wherever she was, then take a commuter flight to Traverse City, then rent a car and drive two hours to Petoskey.

But then she arrived at McLean and Eakin, and she changed her mind. Ann Patchett says that McLean and Eakin is the most charming bookstore in the country. McLean and Eakin inspired her to buy her own bookstore in Nashville. While she was up here, she toured some cherry orchards. She and her husband have been coming up there in the summer ever since.⁵

The main character Lara goes for a walk with her hapless rescue mutt Hazel, and they end up in the orchard’s cemetery. It’s on the highest, nicest plot of ground on the entire farm. It overlooks the cherry trees and the barn and even has a distant view of the lake.

“Death ends a life,
not a relationship.”

It’s the perfect place for the main house, but, no, “those first settlers gave the best land to their dead, the very first a two-year-old named Mary. One by one they followed her up the hill until 29 of them were resting beneath the mossy slabs, and there they wait for us to join them. That’s what life was like back in the day, you buried your children, your husband, your parents right there on the farm. They had never been anywhere else. They had never **wanted** to be anywhere else.”⁶ There they wait for us to join them. Death ends a **life**, not a **relationship**.

Love is long. Love is immortal. There’s not much else to say. “Now faith, hope, and love abide, these three, and the greatest of these...”

⁵Gilbert Cruz, “Ann Patchett on Summer Love and Her New Novel, *The New York Times Book Review*, August 4, 2023,” <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/08/04/books/review/ann-patchett-on-summer-love-and-her-new-novel.html?searchResultPosition=1>

⁶Ann Patchett, *Tom Lake* (New York: Harper Collins, 2023), 44.

—Prayers of the People—
The Reverend Christine V. Hides

This prayer was inspired by Ecclesiastes 3 (NRSV)

The quoted phrase can be footnoted: Whyte, David. "Memory," in *Consolations: The Solace, Nourishment, and Underlying Meaning of Everyday Words*. Langley, WA: Many Rivers Press, 2015.

Eternal God, Ruler of the Mysteries of Time,
The one who created a season for everything and a time
for every purpose,

We praise you for the ongoing harvest
Where we reap what has been planted in the nourishing
earth.
Hear our gratitude for the ways you, O God, have built
us up,
gathered us together and made a way for laughter and
dancing.

We strive and we strive to live in the present,
Breath by breath, step by step,
But find that every moment holds countless memories.
We inhabit "A multi-layered inheritance of existence"
Of your divine making.

As we attend to the intertwining of life and memory
and our interdependent lives,
our joy and praise, lament and petition commingle.

Gracious God, let there be time for weeping for what
is lost,
Mourning those we love,
Honoring those who have served their country and
sought the common good.

In this time of war and strife,
Shape your people to be
Creators of love and peace,
Protectors of children and the innocent,
Bearers of hope,
Speakers of truth.
Let us never forget that behind every sterile statistic
There is a name, a face, and a story that is sacred to you,
Holy God.

With every rising of the sun,
Fill us with longing for you, O Author of Time.
Ignite our will to live as Christ lived,
Sustain us by your spirit
Yesterday, today, and forevermore.

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