



**From the Pulpit: September 10, 2023**  
Twenty-third Sunday in Ordinary Time—Capital Campaign

**The Reverend Dr. William A. Evertsberg**

I Corinthians 13:1–4; Exodus 14:5–14

*The Greatest of These, I: Patience*

We're starting a new sermon series this morning called: The Greatest of These, which is about 1 Corinthians 13, that love is not simple and singular but rather compound and complex. It's not a smooth round pebble but like a multifaceted gem with many sides. Or to change the metaphors, it's like a prism that breaks a simple yellow light into a rainbow of colors. Today we're reading 1 Corinthians 13 and then a story from Exodus.

*But Moses said to the people, "Do not be afraid, stand firm, for the Egyptians whom you see today you shall never see again. The Lord will fight for you, and you have only to keep still."*

*If I speak in the tongues of humans and of angels but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. And if I have prophetic powers and understand all mysteries and all knowledge and if I have all faith so as to remove mountains but do not have love, I am nothing. If I give away all my possessions and if I hand over my body so that I may boast but do not have love, I gain nothing. Love is patient;*

*"If we love someone, we will be patient with his foibles and failures. If we love everyone, we will be patient with their foibles and failures."*

I've officiated at about 300 weddings in my career, and I'll bet I've read I Corinthians 13 at about 200 of them, maybe 250. While planning weddings I tell couples that there's good news and bad news about reading this passage at their wedding.

The good news is that Paul's powerful, peerless, poignant, paean to love is perfect for weddings. The bad news is that because it's so perfect, you hear it at every wedding you go to, and your wedding is going to sound like everybody else's. Young adults between the

ages of 27 and 30 sometimes attend seven weddings a year for their friends, so it can get a little monotonous.

*When the king of Egypt was told that the people had fled, the minds of Pharaoh was changed toward the people, and they said, "What have we done, letting Israel leave our service?" So he had his chariot made ready and took his army with him; he took six hundred elite chariots and all the other chariots of Egypt. The Lord hardened the heart of Pharaoh king of Egypt, and he pursued the Israelites, who were going out boldly. The Egyptians pursued them, all Pharaoh's horses and chariots, his chariot drivers and his army; they overtook them camped by the sea. As Pharaoh drew near, the Israelites looked back, and there were the Egyptians advancing on them. In great fear the Israelites cried out to the Lord. They said to Moses, "Was it because there were no graves in Egypt that you have taken us away to die in the wilderness? What have you done to us, bringing us out of Egypt? Is this not the very thing we told you in Egypt, 'Let us alone so that we can serve the Egyptians'? For it would have been better for us to serve the Egyptians than to die in the wilderness."*

The reason this passage is among the most beloved and repeated of all is that it is on the one hand poetic, light, bright, elegant, and enthralling; and on the other hand, it is heavy, dense, philosophical, and practical. On the one hand it reads like a sonnet from John Donne or William Shakespeare; and on the other if you laminated it, and stuck it under a magnet on your refrigerator, your marriage would be happier.

In this passage Paul suggests that love is not simple and singular but compound and complex. In this passage Paul is breaking up what looks like a simple, common thing into its constituent elements.

One day last month we had a substantial downpour in the Leelanau Peninsula in Michigan and then the clouds broke up and the sun came out and the raindrops in the air, like a prism, broke monotone amber sunlight into a ginormous double rainbow spanning Grand Traverse Bay from Charlevoix to Harbor Springs.<sup>1</sup> It was stunning; it was beautiful, all those reds and blues and oranges and purples.

That's what Paul does in First Corinthians 13 with the simple, common concept of love, breaks it up into its constituent elements and the first rainbow color of love is Patience. If we love someone, we will be patient with his foibles and failures. If we love **everyone**, we will be patient with their foibles and failures.

BECAUSE—now, listen to me; this is very important—BECAUSE, as someone put it, BECAUSE “we must display to others the same patience God has shown to us in our creation and reconciliation. How could we offer to our fellow creatures less than what we ourselves have received: ungrudging patience continually renewed?”<sup>2</sup> Yes?

God has ignored, erased, and annihilated so many of your mistakes that if God **hadn't** ignored, erased, and annihilated them but instead had recorded them in a laundry list and handed it to you, you would be mortified. Therefore, be similarly patient with those you love.

Paul doesn't quite say this but almost: it is impossible to be loving and impatient at the same time.

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<sup>1</sup>I owe this image to Henry Drummond, *The Greatest Thing in the World* (Oxford: Benediction Classics, 2015), p. 12. The book originated from a sermon Mr. Drummond gave in England in 1884.

<sup>2</sup>David Baily Harned, *Patience: How We Wait upon the World* (Boston: Cowley Publications, 1997), p. 159.

Peter Gomes says, “Patience is what you must have when you can't have what you want when you want it.”<sup>3</sup> And if you are a wife or a husband, or a mother or a father, or a daughter or a son, or a sister or a brother—if you live in a family—you know that you seldom have what you want when you want it.

I think the Book of Exodus is funnier than Jerry Seinfeld. That passage I read a moment ago is the first

example in what will turn out to be a long, monotonous litany of Hebrew grumbling which will stretch out for the next 40 years.

Here's what's going on: God has just miraculously liberated the Hebrews from slavery in Egypt and is carrying them to freedom and promise in Canaan. This is practically their first day of freedom.

And so there they wait at the Egyptian border ready to exit Egypt. That's what the word ‘Exodus’ means, right? ‘Exodus’ is Greek for ‘Exit.’ If you go to Greece, ‘Exodus’ is written above every doorway on the Exit sign. In front of them is the Red Sea—average depth 1,600 feet. You can't cross it without a boat, and they don't have a boat because there are thousands of them.

In front of them is the Red Sea. Behind them is Pharaoh's entire army—600 menacing chariots hauled by angry, snorting steeds and piloted by armored charioteers bris-

ting with appalling spears and built like no-neck linebackers bearing down on them at 30 miles an hour.

And they just whine bitterly at Moses. I mean, you can see their side of it. I might be a little miffed too if I were in their sandals. “Moses!” they say. “Moses!”

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<sup>3</sup>Peter Gomes, “Patience: When You Can't Take It Anymore,” in *You Can Do This! and Other Sermons Preached at the Harvard Memorial Church, 2000–2001* (Harvard University, 2001), p.139.

“God has ignored, erased, and annihilated so many of your mistakes that if God hadn't ignored, erased, and annihilated them but instead had recorded them in a laundry list and handed it to you, you would be mortified. Therefore, be similarly patient with those you love.”

Why did you take us out here to die in the wretched desert? Weren't there enough graves in Egypt? Did no one plan for this? Did no one see this coming? We might have been slaves in Egypt but at least we had three squares a day, and a roof over our heads, and no one was trying to run us through with a sword." This kind of voluble discontent will, as I said—stretch on for the next 40 years.

And look at Moses' gentle rejoinder. He doesn't take a swing at a rock with his staff. He will later, but not this time. He just stays in his chair, as they say. He just says, "Don't be afraid. Stand firm. You will never see these Egyptians again. The Lord will fight for you. You have only to keep still."

In other words: "Just chill out, would ya? Just wait a minute. Your only job is to shut up and wait on God. The world rests safely in God's capable hands."

I've told you before how much I love the characters Estelle and Knut from Fredrik Backman's novel *Anxious People*. Estelle is at a real estate open house with several other potential house buyers when they all become hostages to a benign and inept bank robber. So there's nothing for them to do but tell each other their life stories.

Estelle is of very great age. Knut's been dead for a long time, and Estelle misses him so much. They had the happiest marriage.

Somehow at the open house the conversation turns to conflict in marriage and Estelle tells the other real estate hostages: "When Knut and I first fell in love, we reached an agreement about how we would argue, because Knut said that sooner or later the first flush of infatuation wears off and you end up arguing whether you like it or not.

"So," says Estelle, "we reached an agreement, sort of like the Geneva Convention, and we laid down the rules of war. We agreed that no matter how angry we got, we would never intentionally hurt each other with

our words. And we weren't allowed to argue just for the sake of winning, because, sooner or later, that would end up with one of us winning, and no marriage can survive that."

I love that. The rules of war, a Geneva Convention, for when the first flush of infatuation wears off.

One of the other hostages asks Estelle, "Well, did they work, the rules of war?" And Estelle says, "I don't know." The other person says, "You don't know." And Estelle says, "I don't know. We never got past the first flush of infatuation." The narrator wryly points out, "There was no point even trying not to like her just then."<sup>4</sup>

If you live in close proximity with someone who is precious to you but just as shipwrecked as you are, there will inevitably be times when you need a little patience, because patience is what we must have if we can't have what we want when we want it.

So there are two ways to handle that inevitability. First at the very beginning, when you first fall in love, have your own Geneva Convention. Lay down the rules of war. "We will never intentionally hurt each other with our words, and we will never argue just for the sake of winning, because eventually one of us will end up winning, and no marriage can survive that."

You can have your own Geneva Convention. Or the second alternative is: just never get beyond the first flush of infatuation. I recommend the second option.

Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never ends.... And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three. And the greatest of these...

"there will inevitably be times when you need a little patience, because patience is what we must have if we can't have what we want when we want it."

<sup>4</sup>Fredrik Backman, *Anxious People*, trans. Neil Smith (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2019, pp. 241–242).

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

Loving God, giver of life, light of the world, and eternal spirit:

Yours is the morning stillness that makes the dew drops dazzle and illuminates the crisping leaves,  
Yours are the still waters reflecting blue-puffy-cloud skies.  
Yours are the widening ripples of turtle heads and water bugs on the calm, mirrored surface.

Here in this sanctuary, let the busy edges dissolve, give us a different ear, tuned to your whisperings,  
a more perceptive eye, focused on your movement.  
Out of the quiet, be the incarnational presence that emerges.

You meet us in the unexpected quiet:

The moment before the bus rattles down the street, the short second after the carpool door closes,  
The fleeting moment before naptime ends, on the park bench inviting us to pause, and in the peaceful moment at our desk.  
You meet us on the evening walk, and the dog who nuzzles into our lap.  
You meet us at the bedside in the shallow breath and the warm hand extended wordlessly in the waiting room.

Lord, be the calm that quiets our clamoring questions:

Will I get in? Will I be liked? Will it be enough? Will this work out? Will this be the end?

Lead us to that still place of steady inhale and exhale, breath after breath  
Where your presence hovers over the clamor, filling us with peace beyond understanding.

Let your stillness fill us and dwell in us, that we might join you in the long work for peace and justice in an endlessly loud world.  
Let listening lead us into the conversation that needs to break into our understanding.

Be, O God, mental wellness resources that calm the raging mind, the steady hand that stills the one reaching for a weapon  
The food that stills the hungering stomach.

Be O God, the still small voice of wisdom that quiets the room where decisions are made about the fragile margins  
Where healthcare, food, water, and basic necessities are not guaranteed.

Steady the ground trembling with the shock and the mounting losses from the earthquake in Morocco. Make a way for rescue and response. Wrap your comfort around those who wait and those who grieve.

Be the calm and steady flow of supplies and recovery teams after Idalia and the Maui fire.  
Calm the storms forming over the oceans and steer them from landfall.

In your holy stillness, Eternal God, meet us in our beliefs and doubts. Meet us in the wind through the trees, the steady sound of waves, and the plinking rain shower. Meet us as we pray the words Jesus, calmer of the seas, teaches us: Our Father... Amen.

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