

Mennonite Confessions of Love

1 Corinthians 13 by Patty Friesen (Jan.31/16)

Welcome to Mennonite Confessions of Faith and Love – Part III – Why Naomi Schellenberg Should Join the Church. I have her permission to use her as an example. At our membership discussion in December, we listed all the reasons why we join churches – to feel like we belong and to be nurtured in our faith. Naomi piped up from the back row, “I already feel like I belong to this church and I am nurtured in my faith and I’m not a member.” Rats. Then we told her if she became a member, she could serve on council and vote and give money to the church. Somehow those weren’t convincing selling points. I asked again, “Why should Naomi Schellenberg join the church?” This time, someone piped up, “Because we love her!” I suspect she knows this and I suspect she loves us a little bit too or she wouldn’t be here.

Love is the theme from 1 Corinthians 13 today, a scripture we usually only hear at weddings but since we have more funerals than weddings here, I’m going to preach a wedding sermon I preached a couple of years ago and make it relate to church membership. It might be a stretch but let’s see how it goes.

Imagine two gorgeous young people standing in front of the church – we’ll call them Mandy and Marvin. They have put more thought into the party than the wedding ceremony. They do not attend church and may not even consider themselves Christian but when it came time to get married, they wanted a church and they wanted a minister and they wanted God to be a part of it even though they could not articulate why. I see it as the outreach of the church to marry such people in hopes that they will continue to

look to God to be part of their lives and look to the church for the dedication and education of their children. This is what I said to them.

1st Corinthians 13 is wonderful. It is a poetic hymn to what is necessary for love to abide. Besides its beauty, I am guessing we will hear 1st Corinthians 13 read at fifty weddings and each time we hear it, we will be reminded of our own wedding. We will be reminded of the love to which we have committed ourselves. We will be reminded of God's love for us. We will be reminded of the promise and hope there is in marriage. Weddings are public events, something to which we can return to over and over until we are old.

Speaking of being old, we have a lot to learn about marriage from our elders and grandparents. When I worked at the Mennonite Nursing Home in Rosthern, we had ten married couples – most of whom had been married for over 60 years. Some of the couples had been in their second marriages longer than I have been in my first marriage! It touched me every day to see husbands wheeling their wives in broda chairs outside to look at the flowers or wives helping their husbands with their meals. They showed us what “in sickness and in health” means in our wedding vows. We make these marriage vows when are young and beautiful and never knowing what life will bring. But our elders show us what it means to be faithful and loving until death do us part.

One day at the nursing home we were talking about marriage and I asked the residents if anyone had had a perfect marriage. Only one man raised his hand. But he had dementia. That's the gift of dementia I guess. The other residents said, “We're all imperfect, so how could we have a perfect marriage? No, we have had happy marriages, but not perfect ones.”

So I asked them what makes for a happy marriage. What advice would they give to their children and grandchildren and activities coordinator about staying happily married? They listed the following as important for a happy marriage: respect, similarity of values, sense of humor, a commitment to making marriage work, patience, saying I am sorry, and forgiveness. These last points have a lot to do with 1st Corinthians 13. The truth of the matter is that marriage is work. Sometimes it is joy filled work and other days it requires great sacrifice.

All of us want a happy marriage that lasts until we have dementia and are pushing each other in wheelchairs, and feeding each other soft ice cream at the nursing home. All us gathered here today our marriages to succeed. God wants our marriages to be life giving to us and to those around us. Traits like love, patience, and kindness require practice. We don't come by them naturally.

We each will have to practice patience and sometimes zipping it. Flowers will not make any of us more loving. Profound words on patience will not make anyone more patient. Our promises to trust and love are a good start, but those promises will mean little if there is not action. Unless each member of a couple makes the conscious decision to "be loving" the marriage will be less than happy. One of us committing ourselves to this operation will not be enough; it will require both. And guess what - despite our commitments and good intentions we will one day find ourselves acting unkind or impatient. For this reason forgiveness will also need to be a virtue we practice. And this is where God comes in.

God is love and God wants us to abide in love: with God, in our families, in our homes and in our churches. And for love to abide we will need to practice forgiveness. Never forget that God is love, that God loves each of us, and that God loves our marriage.

Healthy marriage offers much joy, security, stability and simply put happiness. According to the elders at the Mennonite Nursing marriage is a very good thing. They say this even though some of them have suffered greatly in this life. Some have lived through economic hardship. Others have had to live with debilitated spouses. Still others have had to bury children and a spouse. Most of them, however, chose to make their marriages a place of refuge when the storms of life hit. Marriage can be that safe harbor for us. It is an institution that has the power to provide happiness regardless of external events. May God grant us, the wisdom of the elders. And may God grant us grace as we practice love, forgiveness, and commitment in our marriages.

In the same way, church membership is a public commitment of love and hopefully a relationship that is a blessing and encouragement to us. Sometimes we join out of duty but love is a more lasting motivator. Dr. Brene Brown describes her joining an Episcopal church in Houston, Texas in her recent book, *Rising Strong*. She said she had grown up in the church but felt like she hadn't left the church but it had left her when it became regimental and legalistic. Finally, after years of not attending church, she and her husband Steve decided to join a church for the sake of their kids so their kids would know enough about Christianity to choose it if they wanted to. She describes their joining day as one of pride and love for their church community in a beautiful old church in downtown Houston. Love is the best motivation for joining a church.

And even if we've been a part of a church for a long time and feel like we belong, and that joining doesn't actually do anything for us at the point in our lives— it certainly does something for the church we are joining. When we have members join Osler, we feel loved and affirmed in who we are and the direction we're going. It's a shot in the arm for us. And I dare say, new members find out it's kind of a shot in the arm for them too – a public affirmation of what they believe in mostly and they feel the love when people shake their hand or hug them and welcome them into the church.

That good feeling about church doesn't last long when there is a contentious church meeting or someone does something in worship that is really irritating and disrupts your worship or someone criticizes something you've done. That good feeling about church doesn't last when it feels like you can't really share what's going on in your life because you don't know anyone well enough or you worry they might judge you. Everything that it takes to have a good marriage, patience, forgiveness, a sense of humour and purpose outside of the relationship applies to church membership as well.

Kathleen Norris calls marriage a school for love, where we learn over and over again how to love someone and go deeper into it. Membership is a school for love as well, learning patience, learning to receive as well as give, learning how to bear with other people and like marriage that is good for us to learn. Let us pray...