

He stands at the front of the sanctuary. She walks to him. They speak words.

*. . . to have and to hold,
for better, for worse;
for richer, for poorer;
in sickness and in health;
to love and to cherish;
to be faithful to you alone,
as long as we both shall live.*

These words not only say what they are committing to one another. These words do something. The words not only come out of them. The words come into them, shaping them, teaching them, and forming them into wife and husband.

Wedding words are not the only words, of course. Marital love is not the only kind of love. Romantic love and sexual love are only two shades of all the colours of love which can bind us together. Still, they are precious and beautiful.

Also, so easily misused, misspoken, twisted and abused are the words we use for love. Especially sexual love.¹

II

Sexual sin, uncleanness, filthiness, crude joking . . . Paul's list sounds like the start of a pulpit-pounding, fire and brimstone harangue. Don't do them! Don't even talk about them!

Something sure has him worked up! What stirs in you when you hear this sort of thing? I brace myself for a tirade against fun, a clenched conversation with one clear message: sex is bad! I've heard that sort of thing enough. So when I hear Paul's words, I add the tone of voice, angry and judgmental.

However, what if he wrote them with a different tone than I imagine? Compassion and concern, perhaps? Worry that people he deeply loves, sisters and brothers in Jesus, are playing on the edge of danger? A tone of pleading and prayer?

Last week I used the image of a garden. If you want a garden to grow good things, you will

¹ "More lies are told using the name 'love' to give the lies credibility than perhaps any other." Eugene H. Peterson, Practice Resurrection: a conversation on growing up in Christ (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2010), 210.

need to clear away the weeds that choke off life and impede flourishing. God makes us for flourishing, for delight, for wonder, to thrive. And for love. To love one another. Including, perhaps, to love sexually. But sometimes it's hard to tell the difference between a sprouting flower and a spreading weed. A lot of stuff is growing in the garden of "love," in Paul's day and in our day.² What plants are you watering?

III

I am struck by how concerned this scripture is with words, with communication. Remember what I said at the start: words make a difference.

So we hear Paul talking about what people are saying, the content of their conversations when the subject is sexual love. How do I put this? . . . The mechanics of the act, the textbook-like description of what two people are doing can be the same. Yet the words we use, our terminology, the tone of the conversation can give it dignity, or trash it. I think there is a difference between "making love" and "hooking up," "scoring," and "having someone." (We could go further with other words, but let's not!) Sexuality becomes about possessing someone, not relationship with them. About getting from someone, not sharing. About crassness, not compassion. About anything except love. Both partners become devalued.

It's not just what we say, of course. Sexual intimacy is itself a type of communication. It says a lot more than words. God designs it for two people to say, "We belong to each other, totally, completely and forever." If that isn't true – if they've fallen for the myth of "sex without strings" – their bodies are saying one thing, but their hearts are saying another. They are using their bodies to tell a lie. Over time, through many hook-ups, we get used to the lying. So if a time comes when we want our sexual intimacy to say what God made it to say, those old habits of dishonesty are hard to unlearn. True intimacy becomes a struggle.³

This is not about being prudish. Certainly not about devaluing sex, or being ashamed or awkward about it. Quite the opposite!

² "Casual sex and all kinds of curious practices associated with it seem to have flourished." Tom Wright, Paul for Everyone: The Prison Epistles (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2004), 57.

³ I borrowed some phrasing from Tom Wright: "Every time two people make love physically, their bodies are saying: 'We belong to each other, totally, completely and forever.' If that isn't true, and if it isn't known by both to be true – if it's just an experiment, a nice idea at the time, a trial arrangement – their bodies are telling a lie. Sooner or later, the lie will come out." Wright, 59.

Shakespeare wrote this:

*For sweetest things turn sourest by their deeds;
Lilies that fester smell far worse than weeds.*⁴

Sexual love is the lily. Beautiful, captivating. A tremendous gift of the Creator. A gift to give. But cheapen or degrade it — by how we speak of it, by how we live our sexual lives — its great power to bless becomes a terrible power to foul and harm.⁵ Let our talk celebrate it, revere it, honour and give thanks for it. Let our sexual lives rejoice in the treasure.

IV

In our reading, Paul uses the powerful image of light and darkness. It's a way of talking about the change the Spirit works in us, when we become part of Jesus. Before, you were darkness. Now, you are light.

Every time we baptise someone, we give them a candle. It reminds us all of our call. We are the light of Jesus in our world. We are like the moon, which does not shine light itself. Yet by reflecting the light of the sun, it is illuminated – we can see it. And it can shine bright enough for us to see in the dark.

If darkness here represents ignorance, foolishness, sin, then because Jesus is shining on us, we can reflect his goodness, his life-giving truth, his justice. We can shine his light into darkness. The idea is not to stand above, or away from, or superior to others. As light-reflectors, we can help others to see. So many experience love in fleeting, disappointing, confused, and even abusive guises. (I'm not only talking about sexual or romantic love here.) By how we live, and by how we show Jesus' love to them, we can be blessings.

Paul writes, *“When anything is exposed by the light, it becomes visible. Anything that becomes visible is light.”*

⁴ The last lines in Sonnet 94. See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sonnet_94

⁵ “. . . the reason why Christians should dislike and avoid vulgarity is not because we have a warped view of sex, and are either ashamed or afraid of it, but because we have a high and holy view of it as being in its right place God's good gift, which we do not want to see cheapened. All God's gifts, including sex, are subjects for thanksgiving, rather than joking. To joke about them is bound to degrade them; to thank God for them is the way to preserve their worth as the blessings of a loving Creator.” John R. W. Stott, The Message of Ephesians (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1979), 193.

This is not about accusing or shaming or rejecting. It's about transforming. This whole letter to the Ephesians is about God bringing everything together, and making all things well. This certainly includes our love lives – friendships, families, romantic loves and sexual loves.⁶

V

The reading starts with sex, and ends with worship. The two are not as far apart as we would think. At their best, both are about love.

All love has its source, its beginning, its energy in God's love. The love that is the Trinity: Father, Son, Spirit in perfect love with each other. The love that comes from the Trinity, God loving us, and all creation, all the time.

Music is the language of love. Even the cheesiest love song bears witness to that! In worship, we sing to each other of God's love. We sing for God, to God's delight. We rejoice, full of thanksgiving in God always and for everything.

Worship immerses us in divine love. God the Spirit floods us.

Remember the garden image. We need to clear weeds away to let good things grow. A great way to keep the weeds out, is to plant strong, healthy, flourishing things, that will flower and bear fruit.⁷

How can we shine the love of Jesus? How can we live the love of Jesus? How can we walk in love, in all our relationships? We mature in love by worshipping, by immersing ourselves in the old, old story that is new every day, of Jesus and his love.⁸

Thanks to God! Amen.

⁶ "Ephesians is uncompromising with respect to nonconformity but places it strategically in the context of transformation. Ephesians sees nonconformity largely as part of the overall strategy of God *to gather up all things in Christ* (1:10)." Thomas R. Yoder Neufeld, Ephesians (Waterloo, ON: Herald, 2002), 249.

⁷ Wright, 63.

⁸ Peterson, 216.