

Love abides: The posture of faithfulness

by [Gilbert Meilaender](#) in the [October 11, 2000](#) issue

The author preached this sermon in summer 2000 at the marriage of one of his daughters.

"Love never ends," St. Paul writes in the lesson we read from 1 Corinthians 13. Or, put more positively, "love abides." What does that really mean—to say that "love abides"? Or, indeed, what possible sense could it make to say this in a world in which the truth so clearly seems to be that love quite often does not abide?

We pause for a moment in this service in order to think about just that question. And we do this not primarily for the sake of Hannah and Christopher. No, we do it for our own sake, because the church needs regularly to remind itself what marriage actually means. We do it so that together we can think about how it might be that Hannah and Chris, or any of the rest of us, might solemnly vow "not to part till death parts us."

It's a crazy thing to do, really. That two young people should together reach out and take hold of their future in this way—should determine that, come what may, it will be a future together—can hardly make sense. Unless, perhaps, God makes sense of it for us. For the miracle and the mystery of marriage is that God permits us to exercise just a little of his own creative power—to determine this one thing about our future: that it will be a future together. And having permitted us to be as creative as he himself is, God then asks us—and invites us—to learn also to be as steadfast and faithful as he is.

What might God hope to accomplish through such a crazy invitation? God has in mind to get something done in us and to us. Stanley Hauerwas, who teaches theology and ethics at Duke Divinity School, and who almost never fails to be provocative, once wrote that the most basic law of marriage could be stated in a sentence: "You always marry the wrong person."

He went on to explain: "The one thought to be Mr. Right turns out not to be. Ms. Right tends to show up after marriage. But the adventure of marriage is learning to love the person to whom you are married. . . . Love does not create a marriage;

marriage teaches us what a costly adventure love is.” He’s deliberately made the point a little provocatively, but it is nonetheless true.

Of course, for anyone who is married, it is true that you may not be married now to the person you once thought you were marrying. Five years from now, or ten years from now, the person sitting next to you won’t necessarily be the person you thought you were giving yourself to.

So if marriage requires us to choose just exactly the right person . . . well, we’re in very big trouble. The target keeps shifting. Marrying means promising to be faithful to someone who may keep changing. And so, the church does not ask today, “Christopher, do you love Hannah?” but rather, “Christopher, will you love Hannah?” “Hannah, will you love Christopher?”

Marriage, therefore, exists not primarily to make us happy but to make us holy—though in the long run, of course, there can be no happiness apart from holiness. But it’s holiness that God is after. And so in marriage God goes to work on us—begins to teach us what it means, what it will require of us, to love even just this one person as God loves each of us, with steadfastness and faithfulness. Every marriage will be different, of course, and so the lesson will have to come in different ways, but it has a chance to happen for us only as we accept the discipline of marriage as God’s good gift to us.

So, for example, Chris—a young man who is, if I may say so, almost obsessively neat—is going to have to learn to love Hannah, who is her mother’s daughter, and who therefore never met a scrap of paper or a piece of junk that she didn’t think should be saved somewhere. And Hannah, who has grown up in a household in which cars are things that are washed once or, at the very most, perhaps twice a year, things in which you eat hamburgers, french fries, candy and ice cream—Hannah is going to have to learn to love someone who is deeply devoted to a spotless and shiny car. This will not always be easy. Chris, a fairly reserved and quiet fellow, is going to have to learn what it means to be talked to all the time. And Hannah is somehow going to have to learn that, as Kierkegaard says, “silence also belongs to conversation at times.”

They will have to learn these things, and have opportunity to learn them, precisely because, by God’s grace, “love abides.” God gives us time. That comes first—the time, the abiding, the commitment to abide in a love like God’s, the love that joins

Father, Son and Spirit. And when that comes first, when—as God’s gift—you have a duty to abide, when you know that this other person is not just someone you fell in love with but (to paraphrase Will Willimon) “the one you’re stuck with,” then very gradually we may learn. Then God slowly begins to make of us the people he wants us to be, draws us into his own love—the only sort of love that truly abides.

In his book *Works of Love*, Søren Kierkegaard, that tormented genius of 19th-century Denmark, wrote a series of chapters reflecting upon the themes of 1 Corinthians 13. One of his chapters is titled simply “Love Abides,” and in that chapter are two of the most unforgettable and powerful pages that I have ever read. I was tempted just to read them today, but I didn’t think that would work too well. So instead I will try simply to capture their flavor for a moment—if only in summary form.

Kierkegaard pictures two people (“lover-beloved,” joined by the hyphen that is God’s own love, the love which abides) who no longer seem able to sustain their bond. “And so the breaking-point between the two is reached,” he writes. The beloved turns away. But, says Kierkegaard, the lover keeps the hyphen: “lover-.” Imagine, Kierkegaard says, that you saw nothing but a word followed by a hyphen. What would you say? You would say that the word is not yet complete. Consequently, the lover—who wills to abide in the eternal love that is God’s—believes that the relationship which another considers broken is a relationship that has not yet been completed. The lover abides.

Then Kierkegaard comes at the point again, shifting the metaphor. “And so it came to the breaking-point.” But the lover abides. He—or she—says: We’re only halfway through this sentence, a sentence that is not yet complete. What a difference there is, Kierkegaard notes, between a sentence fragment and an unfinished sentence. And for the lover, who wills to abide, it cannot be a broken fragment. The sentence is simply not yet complete.

Then Kierkegaard does it again. “And so it came to the breaking-point.” Lover and beloved are no longer speaking to each other. But, Kierkegaard writes, “the lover says: ‘I abide; therefore we shall still speak with one another, because silence also belongs to conversation at times.’”

And once more Kierkegaard does it, using one grand image: “Does the dance cease because one dancer has gone away? In a certain sense. But if the other still remains standing in the posture which expresses a turning towards the one who is not seen,

and if [because you abide] you know nothing about the past, then you will say, ‘Now the dance will begin just as soon as the other comes, the one who is expected.’”

Every time I read that, I try to picture it. The lover, standing there in the posture of the dancer, waiting for the beloved. Not assuming that the dance has ceased, but abiding. Expecting the beloved to come and the dance to begin again. I try to picture it.

It seems like a rather awkward posture, doesn’t it? One could get a cramp—or lots of cramps. A stiff neck. One could tire. One could become impatient. But that is why God gives us time, gives us marriage: that we may not tire, but, on the contrary, gain joy in abiding. And that, Hannah and Chris, is why God gives you time, gives you marriage today—that slowly and patiently you may be drawn into God’s own love, a love stronger and more steadfast than comes naturally to you or to any of us. That you may be drawn into the dance of love that never ends, because, as St. Paul says, “love never ends.” Love abides.