

I won't bore you with many autobiographic details about Grandma and Papa. The meat of it is: they married young and raised two children, Tommy and Faith (my mother). Papa was a Methodist preacher most of his adult life, Grandma was a professional educator and the consummate preacher's wife. I'm sure a survey of the earlier years of their marriage would provide many object lessons on love, but I wasn't around then. I only really observed the last decade of their marriage, and from a natural perspective it was a tragic ending. From the perspective of God's idea of love it was a grand finale.

About ten years ago, Grandma was diagnosed with Alzheimer's Disease. If you've ever watched a loved one struggle with this brutal illness, you know that it progresses little by little until, in most cases, the victim literally loses his or her mind. For the last six years of her life, Grandma lived in a constant state of terror and confusion. She often awoke in the middle of the night in a cold sweat, scared to death that an intruder was in the house. She didn't know who I was, she didn't recognize her children, and eventually she couldn't even identify her own husband, who came to visit her in the nursing home every single day without fail. Papa woke up early in the morning, drove to the facility, and sat all day long with a woman who generally didn't know who he was. Papa had developed a little daily routine which was their custom until their health prevented them from getting around: He sat by her side at the nursing home all morning, and at 11:30 on the dot they patronized the local Wendy's fast food restaurant, where the workers knew them by name. Since they ordered the same meal every day, they didn't even have to tell the cashier what they wanted; it was the same three items from the 99 cent value menu (Papa was quite the cheapskate) with one medium Diet Pepsi, which they shared, every single day. After sitting in Wendy's for two or three hours watching the people (something old folks seem to love to do), they'd head back to the nursing home until visiting hours were over and the staff kicked Papa out. He'd be back the next morning, bright and early, to do it all again.

Eventually, Grandma's health deteriorated so badly that even these simple trips to Wendy's were impossible. Her mental faculties eventually eroded so severely that she didn't recognize simple objects like a spoon or a fork. Papa watched his once bright and beautiful bride lose her ability to think, speak coherently, or even use the restroom. When she did speak to him, it was to curse him and tell him how much she hated him. She literally had no more control of her emotions, and all logical thought had eluded her. None of this ever stopped Papa from enduring hour upon hour in the Alzheimer's wing of the assisted living home, brushing his wife's hair, telling her how beautiful she was.

As I grow up, I marvel more every day at the love that enabled Papa to love his wife in those last few agonizing years of their marriage. It was a love that compelled him to sit with her in a cold, depressing nursing home for eight hours a day, even though she wasn't completely aware of his presence, and she certainly wouldn't remember that he'd been there. It was a love that was demonstrated again and again by the way he gently spoke to her and told her he loved her regardless of her ability to reciprocate his affection. This love outlasted the jitters and butterflies that accompany newfound romance. It was not dependent on external beauty; it did not rise and fall with the ebb and flow of life.

1 Corinthians 13, that famous chapter cited at most Christian weddings, describes this true love. Paul calls love patient, kind, humble, and a score of other things that run much deeper than surface emotions. And the chapter concludes by extolling love over all the other virtues, implying that it is the only thing that will live forever. Are you ready for real love? The kind of love that demanded of my grandfather that he comb the hair of his wife as she stared blankly into space, not even knowing he was there? Are you ready for that? Or are your prayers for true love really just fantasies of your emotional and physical needs being met?

The reason so many marriages don't last is because most individuals don't have a completely functional understanding of love. 1 Corinthians 13, along with the example of my Papa, have provided me with a foundation on which I'm building my lifelong relationship with my wife. What does this mean for you as you pray, date and develop in preparation for marriage? You'd better be prepared to "hang in there no matter what." You should approach each opportunity for relationship with caution and a long term perspective. It is disheartening to me to see students enter the pattern of dating...breaking up...dating someone else...breaking up....I am concerned that this cycle develops a poor pattern for the relationship of marriage. The devastating results are evidenced by the alarming de-emphasis on the sanctity of marriage in today's "if it doesn't work out, give up and try somebody else" society. God's idea of marriage is hanging in there, no matter what. His idea of love is 1 Corinthians 13. His demonstration of love was most vividly expressed on a cruel cross, giving His own life for us "while we were still sinners" (Romans 5:8).

Papa died about a year and a half before Grandma. Just before Papa died, I was driving him around town one day and I asked him, "How do you do it? How do you give yourself to Grandma every day, expecting nothing in return?" He looked at me as if my question wasn't worth answering. To him the answer was implicit and obvious: "She's my wife." Enough said. Papa had determined to finish what he started. The grace of God enabled him to do so. A few years ago, in a rare moment of clear thought, Grandma told me something about Papa I'll never forget. Her words were slow and slurred, but their impact changed my life. We were eating at Wendy's (of course) when she looked me in the eye, pointed to Papa, and said, "That's a good man. He loves me no matter what. Aggravates the fool out of me sometimes, but loves me no matter what." A relationship without regret requires real love. A love that "hangs in there no matter what." Settle for nothing less.