

Make sure you want the marriage, and not just the wedding.

So often when we dream about weddings when we are young, especially for us women, it's all about the beauty of the single day in which the vows are made. Maybe we get excited thinking about the host of parties leading up to the day, with explosions of glittery, hand-lettered decor, and white-laced joy too. And I loved "Say Yes to the Dress", both New York and Atlanta, in my younger years, among the other shows in TLC's wedding content portfolio, but I wonder how many of the folks on those shows really took this advice to heart - focusing on and deeply desiring the marriage, the journey, the actions and commitment of this holy vow, and not just the splendor and joy and beauty of a big party.

The advice that usually comes later down the road, long after I believe it should, is the wisdom that marriage is a lot of work. It's not continual, joyful, glamorous parties - it's working through problems together, it's the day to day actions of support and survival and creating a home together, it's growing with your partner and supporting them throughout unforeseen ups and downs, it's the debacle of who's going to change the baby's diaper or clean up the cat vomit this time, and it's the longer-lasting but perhaps not as beautifully commodified journey of life and love together.

I love a beautiful wedding. What a gift it is to be part of someone's day of celebrating and committing to love. They're filled with joy and love and celebration, no matter the size or budget or guest list or location or any of that. They're truly centered on people who love each other and I think we could all use a bit more of these gorgeous, life-giving traits these days. But the gift of the wedding, the gift of the mountaintop moments in a journey of love, are not the only thing that make it worthwhile. The journey itself, embracing and living into those day to day actions are really what make a commitment of love come to life. It's the tangible ways you show up and never give up on the person to whom you've committed your love.

Love is rooted in positivity, of course. It's such a joyful gift and blessing. Feeling loved and being truly known is one of the greatest gifts we can

receive in our human lives, absolutely. Love is assuredly a gift, given to us unconditionally by God, who teaches us to love because God first loved us. And God's love for us, made human in Christ Jesus, is never something we have to earn, through good works or being or doing enough. We are enough just as we are. We do not need to hustle for love or being worthy of love. God created us in love, and Christ, every single day, invites us to abide in this gift of love.

But love is not made to be a gift we hoard just for ourselves. It's not a personal acceptance just for the sake of our own self-improvement. We are commanded to love one another as God has loved us. In today's scriptures, as well as many other places throughout the Bible, we are commanded to love one another and abide in the love of Jesus, for all people. There is no greater love than this. Just as God's love for each of us is not conditional on us meeting certain standards, agreeing on everything, looking a certain way or loving a certain way, we must love every person with no qualifications or conditions required. Love looks different ways for different people and different situations. Loving creation and the world God made, for example, requires effort to preserve the gift that is this earth and all its plants and creatures are for us too. Loving people sometimes is as easy as breathing, a continual reminder of the gifts and joys of life. But loving people can also sometimes look like boundary setting, having uncomfortable but necessary conversations, maybe therapy or other types of counseling to love yourself or your closest people well. Love isn't always the cute and Pinterest-quote worthy pithiness. There is the love that can feel kind of tough when we do hard things of not enabling toxic behavior for people we love, and there is the love that is purely, simply joy and pleasure, feeling soft and cozy around the heart.

Regardless of the different ways that love can look, the key uniting factor is that love is actionable. Love is a daily tending, a consistent action, an actual doing something for the sake of the neighbor, and not just what you think that neighbor may need, but what will truly lift up the life and dignity inherent in every single other person that is loved by God. We do not control the fact that God truly and deeply loves every single one of us, in our broken and beautiful humanness, and so it is not up to us to control

who gets to be loved by us. We must show love and show up for all people. There is no greater love than this, to lay down our lives for our friends, for our beloved sisters and brothers in Christ Jesus.

As Dr. Michael Chan in his commentary says so prophetically - love is both a gift and a command. Love is not always the mountaintop joy, it is also the hard and holy work of showing up for the people and things you truly love. The words of Jesus focus more on the commandment part of love because it's so much harder than just the sparkly, easy gift. But love is worth it. Love is worth all the efforts put forth for the sake of others. We need this encouragement from Jesus. We need this clarity of calling if we are to bring the kingdom of heaven closer for truly all people. We need the foundation of love as both a gift and a command, a joy and a holy course of work, if we are to ensure that all of our neighbors and friends receive the love they deserve from us and from our corners of the world. We need the power of Jesus himself, the joy and new life promised and given to us in his resurrection, if we are to truly make love real and tangible for all our neighbors, all our friends, all of the beloved humanity, the body of Christ.

Sometimes our love and worship of God, falls into a season where it's just a pleasant gift and mountaintop of an occasional experience, the wedding idea of gift, but friends, this is not the calling that Jesus gives us. This is not the long-term life of faith and discipleship and following God's commandment of love. Jesus calls us to the marriage type of tending love for our fellow people, not the wedding moment of a temporary high, as the action of our faith. Following the God-given commandment to love is about the not always cute or glamorous ways we have to show up for people - it's not always fun or comfortable or the way we think things should be, but it is worth the journey of growing with the people around us. Love requires growing and learning. Love requires an acknowledgment of others' belovedness and humanity. Love requires a focus on the God who created us and the world, and not our own worldly definitions. Love requires a deep trust and faith in the work of the Holy Spirit, who changes hearts and lives and sets us on fire for the sake of loving the world God made. Love requires following God's command, the only truly perfect love that casts out

fear and hatred and sin. Love requires our honest efforts, prayers, actions, and hope, made possible in Christ Jesus, who invites us to abide in that love, every single day.

So friends, how can you embrace both the gift and the command of love today? This week? This month? How can you find moments of celebratory joy and find a practice of daily tending your friends and neighbors in love? How can you grow and learn and serve for the sake of your fellow people? I pray that in your discerning, that you find God alongside you, that you find the Holy Spirit lifting up and empowering you in opportunities to love and serve. I pray that you feel this deep and abiding love of God made human in Christ Jesus, and that the joy of the work, the joy of the actions of love, fill you and guide you in Christ's name. Thanks be to God. Amen.