

“Real Love” February 15, 2009

Yesterday was Valentine’s Day, so we thought it would be appropriate to reflect a bit on the nature and various dimensions of love. Valentine’s Day itself has been devoted to a romantic type of love, and that really stems from its origins. Apparently, there was a priest in 3rd century Rome by the name of Valentine. The Emperor at the time, Claudius II, had determined that unmarried men made better soldiers than married ones, so he outlawed marriage for his potential crop of new soldiers. Valentine defied the decree, and continued to perform marriages in secret. He was found out, and thrown in prison.

Supposedly, Valentine himself sent the very first Valentine greeting, while in prison. It is thought that he fell in love with a young woman who visited him in prison, perhaps the jailer’s daughter. To express his affection, it is said that he sent her a letter, and signed it “From your Valentine.” Sweet, isn’t it?

Today, however, this whole notion of Valentine’s Day connected to romantic love seems to have been watered down a bit. After all, almost every school child gives valentines to every other classmate, and a look at all the varieties of Valentine cards reveals that there are cards for every genre of relationship that could possibly exist.

It seems to me that many of us casually throw around the word “love” to the extent that the depth of its meaning may have become lost. We say things like, “I just love your outfit!” or “I love chocolate ice cream.” When we use the word that way, it is not the same depth of love that we’re talking about today.

I believe that the highest kind of love is the kind of love that comes from God. At one point in the Bible, it says, “God is love,” and points out that we are to love one another. However, I have a sense that love as it’s defined in our faith story, is far different from the light way in which we throw the word and trivialize the concept in much of our society.

I’ve always appreciated the way the late Scott Peck defined love in his now classic book, *The Road Less Traveled*. He said this, “**Love is the will to extend oneself for the purpose of nurturing one’s own or another’s spiritual growth.**” That can describe the highest kind of love in virtually every type of relationship. What I like about what Peck says is that it identifies a degree of intentionality. It’s not just this warm, glowing, fuzzy infatuated feeling that we see so often in the movies, but is far deeper than that. It means we *extend* ourselves—we stretch beyond our own interests, our own desires, our own needs—to further the other person’s spiritual well-being—to do what we can to bring out the best virtues and talents buried within our loved one.

There’s a story that’s been told about the love between the duo of George Burns and Gracie Allen. Gracie was known to be a bit “ditz” at times, and on occasion more than a just bit ditzy. On one of those occasions, a friend of George’s looked at him as if to say, “Why do you put up with that? Why do you stay with her?” However, before he could get the words out of his mouth, Burns said, “Because I love her.”

You see, the love George had for Gracie went far beyond the petty irritations and her eccentricities. It had a quality that’s been called “positive distortion.” Judy Pearson, a professor at Ohio University coined that term to describe relationships like those of George Burns and Gracie Allen. She stated that most of those who stay together over the long haul have this ability to overlook negative factors in the relationships. In fact, Pearson said, “**If love is not blind, it certainly has strong evidence of astigmatism.**”

Relationships that last seem to have some of that quality of positive distortion. As Sam Levinson said, “**Love at first sight is easy to understand. It’s when two people have been looking at each other for years that it becomes a miracle.**” He’s right; it’s easy to let someone’s annoying little habits get under our skin, and it’s easy to try to offer some “correctives for the things that tend to irritate us, but that’s unrealistic, and ultimately leads to a breakdown in a relationship.

Occasionally when I conduct marriage ceremonies, I’ll tell the story about a couple celebrating their 50th wedding anniversary. They were sitting on the porch swing after a long day of celebration, reflecting on the events of the day. The husband put his arm around wife of so many years, and said to her, “I’m proud of you, honey.” “What?” she replied. “You know I’m hard of hearing. What did you say?” He calmly repeated, “I’m proud of you, honey.” She put her hand on his knee and responded, “Oh that’s OK. I’m tired of you, too.”

As in any relationship, there are those times that we’re “tired” of the other, or we get annoyed or irritated. That’s the nature of being close to someone. But the reality is that not one of us is perfect; not one of us does it right all the time. The very nature of being human means that we mess up more than we don’t, and one of the essentials in any relationship, it seems to me, is accepting the person as he or she is, not trying to change them, and forgiving where forgiveness is needed. It’s not an “I’ll love you IF,” kind of thing...it’s really an “I’ll love you NO MATTER WHAT.”

The words of today’s Bible passage may be familiar to some of us, even though it’s a different version from the one we sometimes hear at weddings. Nonetheless I think these words really describe the depth of love that is closest to God’s love; it’s an unselfish kind of love, a giving kind of love. And I have to admit that, when I get in one of those places—unfortunately more than I would like—that I remind myself to go back to this passage. It serves as a sort of yardstick for me to measure my self-absorption when it comes to a relationship, and it’s usually exactly what I need to re-read to put myself on a different course. The

words of Paul from I Corinthians chapter 13 from The Message are these:

"If I give everything I own to the poor, and even go to the stake to be burned as a martyr, but I don't love, I'm nothing. So, no matter what I say, what I believe, and what I do, I'm bankrupt without love.

Love never gives up.
Love cares more for others than for self.
Love doesn't want what it doesn't have.
Love doesn't strut,
Doesn't have a swelled head,
Doesn't force itself on others,
Isn't always "me first,"
Doesn't fly off the handle,
Doesn't keep score of the sins of others,
Doesn't revel when others grovel,
Takes pleasure in the flowering of truth,
Puts up with anything,
Trusts God always,
Always looks for the best,
Never looks back,
But keeps going to the end.

This passage says it all; it talks about the selfishness and self-centeredness with which we all struggle. It identifies our tendency to think we're better than someone else; it talks about foolish pride, and trying to "one up" another person. It talks about the damage that unbridled anger can cause; it implies the need for compassion for those who are hurting or struggling. This passage reminds us of how important the gift of forgiveness is when it says love doesn't keep score of the sins of others.

Those words are the reminders we need to extend ourselves a little further, to remember what we've already been through, and re-commit to help one another be the best we can be. Whenever we get in one of those "holier than thou" moments, as my mother would call them, those self-righteous "It's all about me" kinds of moments, we need to remember the words of Scott Peck and the words of our Bible passage for this morning.

There's something we need to realize when we practice this deeper kind of love, and that is that there's a risk involved. To be really loving means being open and vulnerable, and it means letting people know who we really are and what we're actually like. It's risky, because loving also involves pain. Love can break our hearts, but it can also fill our hearts and heal us. As a famous poet once wrote, "Tis better to have loved and lost than never to have loved at all." Love is risky, and it can be painful, but we'd be less than full human beings if we never allowed ourselves to love and be loved, even knowing the perils.

Valentine's Day has given us the opportunity to express our love for others, but I'm hopeful that we don't just limit such words and actions to the 14th of February each year. All of us want to know that we are both loving and lovable, and we need to know it all the time, not just one day a year.

Please let's not be like the husband whose wife was always asking him if he loved her. He wasn't a very expressive guy, and finally, after she had bugged him repeatedly, he exploded, and said to her, 'Honey, I told you when we were married 25 years ago that I loved you. If that every changes, I'll let you know!'

Please, let's not be like that person. Instead, let's find ways to express our love for the people in our lives. The words are important, yes, but those words are shallow if they're not accompanied by loving actions. It is vital to be able to tell the people we love that we love them, but we have to show it, too.

We can show our love in all kinds of ways—by giving our time to be with them; by really paying attention to them, looking them in the eye, really hearing what they're saying, trying our best to understand what they're experiencing, encouraging them to keep on keeping on. It takes time and energy to nurture any relationships, and the best way we can extend ourselves for the sake of the other persons in our lives is by listening, really listening. Someone once said, "Intensive listening looks a lot like love." Not only does it look like love, it's a valid expression of love.

Our capacity to love comes from the love God has for each and every one of us. We love because God loves us. It's basically a matter of allowing God's love to permeate our being, and then to allow that love to flow from us toward others in our world. That kind of love, as the Bible passage says, "Keeps going to the end."

Closing:

Someone by the name of Franklin Jones once said, "Love doesn't make the world go round. Love is what makes the ride worthwhile."

As we leave here this morning, I hope and pray that we will choose to let ourselves love and be loved fully, for that's what makes it all worthwhile.

Have a good Sunday, and go in peace. Amen.

