

FAITHFUL OVER A LITTLE

The concept and the reality of love always leave me baffled, humble, and awestruck. I hope you feel the same way about it. Some people get that same kind of feeling by looking up into a clear night sky and “feeling” the vastness of the stars. That happens to me too, but it is not so dramatic as the wonder of love.

The hymn said “Love divine, all loves excelling ... joy of heaven to earth come down.” I don’t hear that ending anything; I hear it for openers! It brings that same feeling as the vast, unending expanse of the starry sky. And I know myself caught – not tragically or hopelessly, but nonetheless caught – in a tiny body, with a marvelous but still very limited brain. The trouble is, my soul or will or heart or interior self (whatever you want to call it) is *not* so limited. It feels the hunger and draw and expanse of the divine love, even if dimly. Once that becomes conscious, we can find no rest (as St. Augustine said). We find no rest until we rest in God.

The most important thing of all to know about love, then, is that we can never be comfortable about it; we can never be content with our place on the spectrum. Thinking about love, feeling love, experiencing love illumines our incompleteness, our unfinishedness, our smallness. It does not have to feel bad that love does this to us – unless we come with the expectation of measuring up to the fullness of love. If we do that, then love devastates us. We become antagonists to love. Guilt and fear mount in geometric waves of interior hell: justification by rationalization, lies, pretense, and play-acting.

Love is wonderful as long as we want to stay humble and teachable and keep growing. Love is horrible if we think we have arrived, or want to convince somebody else that we have.

“Love divine, all loves excelling” There are over seven billion individual persons on the face of the earth, plus trees and cattle. How many other globes there are, with how many quintillions more individuals, we do not know. How many dimensions there are beyond the space/time spectrums of our kind of awareness, we do not know. What we *do* know is that if there is any entity anywhere that is hurt, lost, alone – love does not like that! The love within us feels like somehow, no matter how possible or impossible, we should be there. If we cared, we would not let that happen. Our minds can feed us statistics

all day long about how we couldn't have been there, we didn't even know, and there was no way to get there. But love does not care about any of that. If that child needed us, on some planet three galaxies over, then love thinks, "By God, we should have been there!" And the heart weeps the same no matter what the reasons or the logic may say.

The capacity to love is the image of God within us – the way God made us in God's own likeness. It is connected with the eternal realms from which we came and to which we are going. So love does not fathom the terrible restrictions of time and space. It has no real sympathy for such limitations. Therefore the most important thing for us to know about love is that we will never be comfortable with its expectations: we cannot live up to its standards. If we do not come to terms with this, either we will go crazy or we will turn cynical and try to disbelieve in love altogether.

Let me remind you, just a little, of the heat and power of this concept in the Scriptures. Even though the Bible tries to honor and reveal the *concept* of love, the *reality* of love cannot be contained, and it constantly threatens to rip right out of the pages.

The principle is that a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined unto his wife, and the two shall become one. We identify that as love, at least one of the basic principles of love. In Jesus' prayer on His last night on earth, He seems to reveal the central purpose of His own coming and consecration in the words that the United Church of Christ has taken as its sacred motto: "that they may all be one." (John 17:22)

So what's wrong with two or more wives, or husbands, or lovers? The heart and the soul would have no trouble keeping up with that. The problem is the limitation – the space and time factor: the body is too slow. Love says, "I'm for you – neighbor as myself. And for mate, well, somehow even more than that. But I love you. If you need me, I'll be there, as much as I can, as much as is in my power." So friends understand (or try to) that it cannot be total. But mate? "I give my all, but you're usually busy with mate #2 or #3 or #4."

You know how it would work. It takes too long to get back and forth. The body is too slow. We cannot keep up. The mind can encompass it, but the physical brain gets tired and confused. The soul and the heart say, "Sure! That's what love is about." But the body makes that love a lie because it cannot keep up; it cannot deliver on the promise that the soul makes when it claims to love. Even with one mate, the body is

always behind just trying to keep up with work and chores, a hobby or two, and a few friends.

Sexual morality is not complicated or mysterious, like we have so often tried to make it. Monogamy does not match the truth that we should all love each other. Monogamy matches the practical reality of this limited realm. It is limited and imperfect enough as it is, but try it with more than one and the damage is severe. Somebody will always get betrayed, severely and inevitably. You can get betrayed in marriage too, but it is not inevitable and it can be healed. That's a huge difference.

Somehow the Scriptures struggle and sway back and forth from the strain of trying to proclaim this unearthly concept of love. We are into the realms of love whenever two people begin to genuinely care about each other on any level. But we are not through with love until every last being anywhere and everywhere is included somehow in the circle of caring. We can try, but we cannot grasp that. We can try, but we cannot live up to that. Over seven billion baffles us, and that is only part of what we know exists in our own tiny corner of one galaxy!

Love is wonderful when we claim it as much as we can, follow it as high (or far) as we can, and keep growing. Love is terrible if we start expecting ourselves or others to live up to its full spectrum. Then it becomes an unearthly and ungodly tyrant – and Satan's favorite tool. Satan – the Father of Lies, the Accuser – loves to show us we are not perfect in love, hoping to get us to rebel against God or quit in despair.

Who is my neighbor? Out of the over seven billion people on earth today, which ones are my neighbor? The answer of the church today is that all of them are. And the church will apply that logic to whatever fund, organization, purpose, or project it happens to want my support for at the moment. I read for you today the greatest guilt-producing passage in the New Testament. Despite the fact that none of you flunk its standards completely, it is read in such a way that we all hear it as the voice of doom unless we love everybody more.

Who is my neighbor? Jesus does not say. His strongest hint, by both teaching and example, is that my neighbor is somebody I personally encounter lying across my way. It is not somebody I go looking to find, but somebody I stumble upon while going about my own business. The Good Samaritan found the man lying on the road he happened to be traveling. Lazarus had been lying at the rich man's very gate, apparently for years. The rich man was not scolded for being rich, nor is it clear

how much he was supposed to do. We are simply told that he did not so much as share with Lazarus a scrap from his own table, apparently not even once.

I'm saying that Jesus does not outline a detailed program for living up to love's demands. Jesus tries to awaken us to love's call, but, in His usual fashion, Jesus leaves us to respond any way we can. We never live up to the full precept, and we cannot. It is terribly important for us to know this, if we are to go on loving ourselves and each other at all. Remember, Jesus Himself failed to live up to the standards of love as we try to impose them on ourselves and each other. Sometimes Jesus didn't even love His mother and brothers, never mind His neighbors. (Matthew 12:46-50; 23:1-37). I am not claiming any disappointment with Jesus; I still believe He did it right. My concern is for what we keep trying to lay on each other and expect from ourselves *in His name*, especially when I cannot see where Jesus tried to put such standards on us in the first place.

If you are open to it, I have probably made the point. So what am I suggesting?

I.) WE MUST GIVE THOUGHT TO OUR LIMITATIONS

We are seldom as limited as we think. Nevertheless, we become more loving, not less loving, when we are merciful enough with ourselves to claim the territory where we will work and try to increase our love – and leave other affairs to other people. I have made this point before, so I won't belabor it. The local parish must follow Jesus in this matter also. He limited Himself to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. To be effective, we must also choose our territory, and that means unchoosing endless other territories. If we do that, we become more loving and we become more effective in our love. It is sometimes painful, but it is mostly a clear and beautiful and freeing principle.

II.) THE ISSUE OF LOVE IS NOT OUR GOOD INTENTIONS

Everybody, in some fashion, has good intentions. The issue is whether we *play* God or *obey* God. Because love's calling and purpose are so high, we quickly follow them into idolatry. That is, once we try to live up to all of love's demands, we are following a divine principle and cannot hope to keep up unless we think ourselves divine. Trying to help everybody we know, or even most everybody, is playing God. We keep taking it on ourselves, thinking we have to do it ourselves: win the day,

save the people, change the country, whatever. The only antidote for this sin of exaggerated goodness, which is graver than evil, is to remember that we serve God – not people. We serve a God who loves people – not “we love people and therefore act like God.” We *take* orders; we do not write them. We try to discern God’s plan enough to play only our own small part; we do not make God’s plans for God. We find happiness by keeping humble, doing the next indicated task, trusting in God for the outcome. That means we are not ashamed to take our Sabbaths – our time off. We are not ashamed to rejoice in the joy we do find, the people we do love, the things we are able to accomplish. It no longer surprises us that things are left over, that people and tasks are left out, and that sometimes *we* are left out. If God wills, we will get to more of it tomorrow. But love is bigger than we are. We cannot live up to all of its demands.

III.) OUTREACH – REACH OUT

We are still getting some confusion about “outreach,” and that’s because outreach is connected to this central theme of love. Outreach means to care about those beyond “us.” But essentially it means to reach out to invite others in. Until recently, the mission of the church was not seen as giving goods to strangers with the intention that they stay strangers. Love reaches out to welcome neighbors, hopefully brothers and sisters in Christ. That was not scalp-hunting or a numbers game – originally. It was sincere, and it can become (and is becoming) sincere again. “Come join the family.” That’s evangelism behind all the abuses and awkwardness. “Come and share the love.”

But “Institutions exist for the painless extinction of the ideas which gave them birth.” (An old Quaker saying.) Without meaning to, we keep trying to institutionalize love. Institutions do not love – people do. The power begins to leak out when we get it into systems. The Trustees are supposed to raise the money; therefore we don’t have to give it anymore. The Deacons or the Membership Committee are supposed to take care of new members; therefore we don’t have to love our neighbor or mention Jesus Christ anymore. You know how it goes. We were just trying to get effective. But love leaks away when we try to carry it in institutions. Love gains power as people get invested – as they give, care, love.

We get to wishing and then thinking that the church should make up for the errors and holes left by the country’s welfare system and foreign policy combined. We keep wanting it to look massive and

impressive. But love is personal. And the more personal it becomes, the greater its power grows, because personal is its native element.

What are the names of the people we gave Thanksgiving baskets to last year? How are they today? You see, they have not been loved. They do not come here yet. They do not feel welcome, and maybe they are not welcome. They are not here learning to love along with us. So what did we accomplish? Kindness of a sort. But you are not going to change the world with that. And we follow One who has come to change the world.

IV.) FAITHFUL OVER A LITTLE – I WILL SET YOU OVER MUCH

To change the world, we have to stop trying so hard. We have to trust God and learn to take it easy. It's hard to stay personal or loving when we are straining. "Truth, like love and sleep, resents approaches that are too intense." We have to stop wanting to look big, be famous, or gain fame or acclaim. How would you like it if somebody pretended to love you just so they could look successful? That's what the church is doing all over the landscape today. And love just walks out. It will not put up with that.

So love can save the world, but we cannot. And if we want to be part of love and learn about loving, we have to stop trying to save the world and instead get back to loving people.

That is Jesus' point. "*You have been faithful over a little; I will set you over much.*" Learn to love one. When you are ready, Jesus will send you more. No need to worry; He's more eager about it than you are! As soon as you can handle it, there will be more – you can be certain. And if we learn to love at all well in this realm, soon Jesus will invite us to try it in a realm not quite so limited. After that, who knows?

Meanwhile, be faithful over a little.