

## WHERE DOES LOVE COME FROM?

I do not usually talk much about love. Next to “God,” “love” is the most abused word in the English language. Frequently in the church, it is used when we have run out of anything important to say. At other times, we use it to confuse the issue, produce guilt, or sidetrack a project that is heading in a direction we do not like. Read I John 4:7-21, but whenever the passage says “love,” read “mush.” That is to remind us of how soft and imprecise the word really is and how few of us mean the same thing by it.

This series of sermons about love will not be an attempt on my part to speak some final or definitive word on the subject. Love is too high for that. Love calls to us, but we do not ever complete or resolve it. It is forever changing our normal ways and definitions, sometimes in ways that are quite upsetting.

On the other hand, many think love is supposed to be the product and the eventual goal of the Christian church. Nobody anywhere ever gets too much of it. Nor do any of us *give* too much of it. We may give or get too much of other products trying to masquerade as love, but love itself is still the most valued item in the world.

So we find ourselves contemplating a concept we cannot define. We are not always sure when we are being loved. Sometimes we are not certain when we are giving it either. Does that about sum it up? We cannot define it, and we are not sure whether it is coming or going. The only thing we *are* sure of is that people do not give or get enough of it, and that is what is wrong with the world.

Some say we have to change on the inside before we can contain enough love to give any love to others. That is quite profound, but then it confuses us to see quite ordinary and even subordinate people doing what seem to be acts of pure love. It is as if love just bursts out of us from time to time without our actually being in control of it. It only happens at moments. But then, none of us have any luck at being consistently loving.

The question for today is not “What is love?” Strangely, in this case we have to save that question for last. The question today is “Where does love come from?”

**God is love. God is the source of love. God is where love comes from.** Any religious person can tell you that, if you do not tell them first. Though most of us might agree, we seldom talk as if we remember it. It is still the proper answer, and I believe it is the true answer. An answer can be true and right and still only turn itself back into more questions.

Take for instance: “*Love the Lord your God with all your heart ... and your neighbor as yourself.*” That answers all of the most important questions that humans ever ask. But even though we do not doubt its truth, we still recognize that it has not answered anything. It has only focused and deepened all the other questions: What is God? How can I best love God? Who is my neighbor? Who am I? How do I love myself? How can I love my neighbor in the way I love myself? What is love?

You see? Seven questions where before there was one. Each one of them is worthy of a lifetime, and indeed we are in the ongoing process of responding to them.

So, not to seek final answers or make closing statements, I have three rule-of-thumb axioms for you to consider:

I.) NO PERSON CAN CONTAIN OR GIVE AWAY MORE LOVE THAN THEY HAVE THEMSELVES RECEIVED.

This is not how we usually think. We tend to assume that most of the people around us were born with an unlimited capacity to love. They are all capable of loving us as much or as little as they choose to. Therefore, if they do not love us, it is because they have *decided* not to. Likewise, if they do not love their children, spouses, neighbors, or workmates the way we think they ought to, it is because they have *chosen* not to. They could; they just do not want to.

Do you see what a setup for guilt and shame and pain and anger that is? If somebody does not love us, there must be something terribly wrong with *us*. If we try really hard and want it a lot and they still do not love us, *they* must be really evil. Thinking in this vein always makes us really, really sad – or very, very angry.

If, on the other hand, our axiom is closer to the truth – that no person can contain or give away more love than they have themselves received – then if a person does not love us, it does not necessarily follow that there is something wrong with us. Maybe they just ran out of love. If they have no more love to give, why does that not call forth

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compassion for them instead of sorrow or anger? It means they are in short supply. Nobody has been giving *them* sufficient love lately, or at least they were unwilling to receive it. That is hardly a reason for us to feel hurt or angry. In fact, if we ourselves have some extra love handy, that's what is called for.

Our normal assumptions do not match our experience any better the other way around. Over and over we choose not to love someone, yet we discover ourselves loving them anyway; it's just there. At other times we decide we ought to love somebody, yet despite our very best efforts, we keep finding that we do not. **By ourselves we are unable and incapable of producing or manufacturing love.** We all live with whatever amount of love we have received from beyond ourselves.

If this is true, everyone has a different capacity to love, and it changes from moment to moment. One of the reasons we need to be a church together is precisely so we can fill in each other's blank places and create a loving community together. Any illustration is bound to have flaws, but the following will have to serve: If a stranger walked through the doors at this very moment, obviously hurt, and stumbled and fell in the aisle with the cry of "Help me!" – nearly every person here would try to respond to that cry. We have all had the experience of being helped when we were hurt. We have been loved that much, so we have that much love to give.

However, if the stranger was not hurt but was instead disheveled, unshaven, poorly dressed, and obviously drunk, our responses would begin to show a wider fluctuation. Some of us have not had the experience of being loved when we were that socially unacceptable. We all deal from an inner awareness of how we would *expect* to be treated if we were in this stranger's place. We tend to judge as we have been judged, or even as we would expect to be judged. (Loving your neighbor as yourself is not always an option. Mostly it happens automatically.)

Now, suppose the stranger burst through the door, shouted "I hate you!" and shot the person sitting next to you. This stranger's behavior might fail to bring a single loving response from anyone among us. Of course, it depends some on how you feel about the person sitting next to you. But truly, not many people have known what it feels like to be loved when their own hearts were as dark and evil as that. Only if we have spiritually visited a Cross that we have helped to raise and discovered what it is like to hear Him say "*Father forgive them ...*" – only then is love available when we get to the dregs,

to the really dark and evil places of life. Self-help books, popular gurus, and Dale Carnegie courses are wise and helpful for the fluff-and-feathers end of life. But the God who reveals himself in Jesus is for sinners. *“Out of the depths I cry to you, O LORD.”* (Psalm 130:1) The murderer of Christians became the greatest apostle of all. *That* is the trademark of love! All other motive power on earth would have killed or run from Paul.

I hope we have morals, and that we refine them and try to live by them. But we are not in the morals business. I hope we like goodness, and that we try to do deeds of kindness and goodness. But we are not in the goodness business. We are in the forgiveness business. *“Those who have been forgiven little, love little.”* (Luke 7:47) That is what our Master taught us. That is where love comes from. *“Those who have been forgiven little, love little.”* If you are running out of love, go get more forgiveness.

II.) NO PERSON EVER DOES OR EVER CAN EARN LOVE OR DESERVE TO BE LOVED.

Again, this is not how we usually think. Most people operate on the theory that there are certain things we can do that will make us lovable – that give us a right to be loved or give us a claim on the love of another. (For example: After all I have done for you. I excel at this or that. I know lots of famous people. I have three college degrees and a Porsche, etc.) Perhaps they are thinking of one of love’s alternatives or counterfeits: approval, acceptance, tolerance, or the like.

Lots of things will earn us love substitutes, but nothing earns love. Nobody can stake a claim on another person’s heart. If someone dies for me, how do I repay that? How do I earn the right for somebody to do that for me? Yet that is love’s nature, should circumstances require it. If someone loves us, that reveals a lot about them. We keep wanting it to reveal a lot about us. The Gospel is not about how terrific we are. It is about how loving God is. We never get that said well enough or understood straight enough, do we? Going to Heaven is not about how much good we do or how good we do it. It is about how much God loves us. Bill Coffin said it: “You are not loved because you are valuable. You are valuable because you are loved.”

So also, if another person does *not* love us, that reveals something about *them* more than about us. Love is a gift, freely given. If it is not that, it is not love. Nobody slips more on this precept than the church. The church wants more time or money with which to help

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people (a noble motive, perhaps), so it says “You should be more loving – give more; do more.” That is a contradiction of its own truth. Love is a gift – not a duty. God does not *have* to love us. We often try to make it sound as if God has no choice in the matter. We do not *have* to love each other. That takes all the value out of it. “I love you, but it’s only an obligation, only my duty.” Thanks awfully. Am I supposed to be deeply touched by such sentiment? When we get loved, it’s because somebody *wanted* to. That’s what makes it great!

Jesus says it a number of ways: If we follow Him and obey Him, more and more we will come to love each other. But the printed page cannot carry His smile. If we get close to Him, He will fill us with love, and then who is going to stop it? We read it grim and hear it as duty. Why don’t we hear Him laughing? “I dare you to take some of the love I offer and then try to hold it in!”

If a person has love to give, it will be given, and nothing can hold it back. If a person has not been loved, there is none there to give, and nothing can draw it out. It would behoove us, then, to never expect to be loved, to never feel we have any complaint coming when we are not, and to always be surprised, delighted, and grateful when we discover that we are loved.

### III.) PEOPLE HAVE THE FREEDOM TO ACCEPT OR REJECT THE LOVE THAT IS OFFERED.

It is normally assumed that people eagerly gobble up all the love that is offered to them. The truth is, we are quite persnickety about receiving love. Charity begins at home, and so does its rejection. When parents mix two parts love with four parts “Don’t touch that” and “Swallow this” and “You can’t go there” and “You have to come here” – well, however necessary and inevitable, baby gets a lesson in love versus freedom. The two are supposed to complement each other, but it is an imperfect world, and often we reject love in order to keep our freedom.

Love is full of impurities in this world. We have all learned to fear the “lover” and to reject the “love,” despite what the pretty phrases say. Hopefully we also begin to learn, along the WAY, that receiving love, even from humans, is worth the risk and that we do not have to let it steal our freedom like it did when we were infants. Nevertheless, the reason we are not more loving is because we have rejected so much of the love that has been offered to us – from humans and from God. We would not receive it, and so we have not got it to give.

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We have rejected a lot of love because it takes time and experience to learn to recognize it – which is next Sunday’s question. Like fool’s gold, there is a lot of fool’s love in our world. “All that glitters is not gold,” and all that acts nice or affectionate is not love. Most of us have some bitter memories of times when what we thought was priceless treasure turned out to be fool’s love.

But that is not the whole story either. The reason we are short on love is because we have refused and rejected the love that is offered by God. And here is where I would like to cut out and remain silent, but that is not fair. We know instinctively, from some seventh sense, that even though love is a gift with no strings attached, *receiving* love will change us by the very power of love itself. Even though we cannot define love – whatever it is, it is a lot stronger than we are – we know that it is powerful indeed. And so we know that if we accept very much of it, it will change us. It will not control or coerce us, but it *will* change us, transform us – convert us.

Oh yes, we are afraid of God’s love. It would be mindless not to be. Consciously we say: “I love You God. I want You in my life. I know You are the source of all things, and You are my only hope.” Then quietly we wonder: Why am I saying this over my shoulder, with my feet running in the opposite direction?

Because deep down I know I will lose my freedom to be my own person in my own way – meaning, in the way I am now. If I receive love, I will cease to be separated off from God and other people. I will feel a unity that will begin to transform and control my living. Therefore I try to accept just enough love to survive on – and maybe, in my best moments, just a tiny bit more. The minute I begin to feel the effects of it, there comes this great urge to save my freedom, to back off lest I lose control, to guard my security. So I cut off the offered gift. And you know what? It is precisely at those times – right after I have turned away from offered love, especially from God – that I scream the loudest about how there is not enough love in the world. It’s like I am trying to distract attention from what I have just done. And you know what? I have started to realize that other people do this too. Just when they have turned away from love that is offered, they start talking loudly about how scarce love is.

Do you ever wonder why so many of the great miracles happen in times of crisis, and why, at such times, we find ourselves being like we wish we could be all the time? In times of crisis or tragedy, the need for love is so great that sometimes we fling the doors wide open.

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At such times, our individual freedom does not mean very much, so we get careless. We start praying passionately and earnestly and with abandon – we even open our hearts! The Holy Spirit, always waiting and hoping and eager to help, is right there, delighted to be invited in at last, even if only for a moment. And so we get magic moments and even miracles.

The hope is that one day we will get such an overdose that we will forget to slam the doors shut when the crisis is over. It happens, you know. All throughout history, it keeps happening. People lose all sense of reality. They become fearless, joyful, hopeful, enthusiastic participants in LIFE, and they join the Great Pilgrimage. They begin to find value in all manner and types of people. Nothing seems to affect their sense of personal well-being; nothing calls them back to counting up the injustices and injuries and hardships they must endure. Instead, they start talking about a new Kingdom that is secret yet all around us, in our very midst.

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