

WHAT IS LOVE?

Where does love come from? It comes from God. We do not make it up. We cannot manufacture it. We have to receive it – accept it from some source outside ourselves – in order to have any to give to others. That is why there is no pride in love. And if it is *true* love, it includes body, mind, heart, and soul – with passion, intellect, and eternal perspective, or at least awareness beyond mere temporal matters.

Did you take last Sunday's assignment to heart and try to make a list of the people you truly love? I heard that a few of you were surprised so many people came onto your list despite the high qualifications. Some of you discovered that there were people you cared about more than you had realized. Others had the opposite surprise, by the way, but we will not go into that. Some of you made more than one list: one for people you would die for; another for people you would give all your material possessions to help; another for those you would be willing to get into serious trouble to support or defend. And you realized that you cared a great deal for some people, but not enough to give up very much for them. Still, they belonged on some kind of list. It is fun to preach to creative people.

Lots of you came face-to-face with love's great dilemma: Sometimes doing too much, giving too much – at least giving it out of time or in the wrong circumstances – can be damaging to the very people we love. That is exactly right! Love is wonderful, but knowing how to be *loving* is often a great dilemma. Watching Jesus deal so differently with different people is part of this same fascination.

Last week we made the concept of love very high. And it IS high! We do need to step apart from the evaluation of our own performance sometimes and see the depth and breadth and height of love. It helps us to get teachable and humble again. We realize that we have not yet arrived. Love in its higher dimensions is not an aberration, no matter what the cynics say. People really do die for others; sacrifice for others; spend their life and time and health and energy, sometimes for years, to benefit those they love.

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The majority of the people I have known in my life are people who have grown bored with just living for themselves, with “going for the gusto,” with tracking their own excitement or benefit or pleasure. Love has called them to more interesting themes and meanings. They would give and do even more, if they could be sure it would bring benefit rather than damage in the long run. Humans are exceedingly wondrous creatures. It’s enough to make us wonder who designed them! Besides all of that, we remember that our tradition’s communion meal is about “body broken” and “blood poured out.” Oh yes, love really does have the higher dimensions we have been trying to ponder. And it continues to transform us, whenever and wherever we will let it touch us anew.

Having made love so high last week, it is also fair now to bring it back to where we live – to let love back in on more mundane levels. Love operates in the midst of very messy, imperfect settings and situations. That is, all mixed in with our own personal needs and desires, corrupted by security instincts, and competing with a dozen other motives and priorities, love still plays in the game and has a powerful influence. Love is incredibly versatile, and it does invite us and include us. So we also legitimately claim that we do love and that we are sometimes loving. While we do not love perfectly, the love we do receive and give is still wonderful, and sometimes amazing and inspiring. People we may not love all of the time, we still love some of the time. People who do not belong on last week’s list nevertheless belong on *some* list. There are people we care about, even if the caring is not perfect yet. We get to participate – we get to try to love and be loved – even though the drama is not perfect here and the referees are sometimes half blind and often mute.

During my college days, I lived and worked at the House of Neighborly Service – a Presbyterian settlement house, as we called it back then – a community center in the slums of Redlands, California, there below the tracks. In the afternoons, I ran several youth groups (we called them clubs in those days) for grammar school kids. In the evening, the high school kids gathered from all over the area for sports and whatever at The House. The big deal was planning a dance, but every dance carried with it the danger of drawing the gangs from nearby communities. It was usually just a lot of strutting and posturing, but there was always the possibility of a “rumble.” We never had a gang war while I was there, though we came pretty close a few times. Sometimes I infuriated the visitors, and even my own guys, by interfering when things were starting to develop into a confrontation.

On Sunday evenings, I was Advisor for the high school youth group at First Congregational Church. Those were high school kids from uptown, the other end of the spectrum. Every week I had this contrast between the two high school groups, whether I wanted it or not. Several times I heard my church kids bragging about doing the very things some of my House kids were on probation for. The code of honor was clearer and tighter below the tracks than it was above the tracks. That was because life was harder and survival was more demanding there.

Ricky was in the church group. He was the slow one. He was big and handsome, with an IQ of about 65 or 70. He became my favorite, though he never knew that. It was clear to me that whatever was going on, he was missing a lot of it. If somebody told a joke, the punchline was just another statement to him. He would notice the laughter and simply shrug, knowing he had missed something again. Whenever I spoke in the chapel services or group discussions, he missed about eighty percent of it. But he did more with the twenty percent he got than all the other kids put together. He got it into his head that Jesus did not like him to lie, did not want him to hurt people or animals, and wanted him to love and serve the church. From then on, he never missed church or youth group meetings. Doubts that bothered the other kids escaped his notice. Rationalizations did not occur to him. If something seemed wrong, he ruthlessly expelled it from his life. He was gentle, conscientious, and caring, and I think Jesus has rarely found a more faithful servant. The group had a much more gifted, charismatic leader, but Ricky was the hub. I wonder what happened to him. I am sure this world will never reward him like God is going to. I loved him, but I needed to go to seminary, and life moved on.

Manuel was in my fourth-grade club (The Panthers) at The House. He was bright as a button, but I never saw him in shoes and I never saw his face clean. The house he lived in had a dirt floor and four other siblings. His father was usually gone, which was a blessing, but there were not many other blessings in Manuel's life that I could see. So where did his bright, enthusiastic, cheerful, appreciative attitude come from? Besides all that, Manuel liked me. I really do not know why.

Twice Manuel saved my life. I rode a bicycle back and forth from the college to where I lived. There was so much noise and activity at The House that, on the nights I was not on duty, I stayed late at the University studying. There were no street lights below the tracks, and large pepper trees grew on both sides of the street as you approached

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The House. It was quite dark under the trees, even on a clear night. One night Manuel flagged me down just before I turned onto the street. One of the gangs was waiting to jump me from the trees. They had knives, he said. It was eleven o'clock at night. He was in the fourth grade! If they discovered his betrayal, they would beat him to a pulp or kill him, and he knew it; it was part of the code. A few weeks later he warned me in the same way of a second ambush. I told him he must never take that chance again – that they were surely already suspicious that somebody was warning me. I promised I would be careful. I wonder whatever became of Manuel. Clearly I never loved him as much as he loved me. Somehow there is pain in that. It is not exactly wrong; it is just not complete, not right – not like how it ought to be.

Possibly you can feel today's assignment coming: Make a list of the people who have loved you. Somehow there are always more surprises on this list than on last week's list. It is an amazing thing to make this list, if you take the time to do it right.

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We cannot define or contain love, not in any whole or absolute sense. But we can participate anyway. And there are ways to identify what we think is outgoing love and to help clarify incoming love. It's true that we sometimes hand out that which we call love but it really is not, and we sometimes accept from others what is called love but really is not. When that happens, somebody will always get messed up until clarity is found. As we mentioned last week, not everything that goes under the name of "love" is love. In nature, that which looks the most like gold is often fool's gold. Sounds like a parable – or maybe, in this case, a parallel.

So what are some of the earmarks, signs, or common denominators of the presence of love, regardless of the form it happens to be taking at the time? Here are some rule-of-thumb indicators of the presence of love:

- I.) SEEING THE HIGHER IDENTITY OF ANOTHER PERSON is one of the first indicators of love.

Love has a strange, almost eerie capacity to behold another from a special vantage point. Unbelievers would say that love idealizes the other person; we might almost agree. Love lets us see partially "through the eyes of God," so to speak. Love sees the other person

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as he or she is intended to be. Love knows or senses what the person will become when fully developed – when “grown up” spiritually. That is why we say that “love is blind” – it sees so far beyond what we normally notice. And when love bases current decisions on future possibilities, we know it is crazy; at least it drives parents crazy when their children fall in love with potential, future possibilities.

In this case, the difference between love and fool’s love is that love is not deluded. It knows full well that the future is not present reality. It knows the gap between the reality of now and the possibility of becoming. When love sacrifices, it knows very well that the risk is great, and it is quite prepared to accept whatever loss may come. This clarity is possible in part because love does not see the other person as primarily existing for its own gratification, security, reputation, or advancement.

Romantic love and neurotic love (is there a difference?) idealize the other person, seeing mostly what the “lover” needs or wants – whether it fits the reality of the “loved” person or not. When we are young spiritually, we try to do that same thing with God. Eventually we have to trade the God we want – the God we “make up” – for the GOD WHO IS. It turns out better in the long run, but we do not know that during the rebellious, struggling days (or years) in which we try to make God deal with us like *we* think God should.

Likewise, real people turn out to be better than the ones we make up to suit our needs and desires. It is far better to know and love someone than to keep trying to warp them into what we need or want from them. That is a lot of what marriage is about, is it not? We marry what we think will solve all our problems and make us happy. Then we discover that it is a real person under the same roof with us – something far more than we married, but not as comfortable or as easily managed. It’s called the Jacob Syndrome: We marry Rachel and wake up with Leah. Only after years of struggle – and finally learning a little something of love – do we discover that it was really Rachel all along.

Do you remember that strange phrase in Second Corinthians? “*From now on, therefore, we regard no one from a human point of view.*” (II Corinthians 5:16) Love always looks for the hidden identity, for the image of God, for the signature of the Creator. Without ulterior motive or some prior plan, love is eager to know: Who is this *really*? What has God come up with this time? What is the destiny of this person, or at

least a trace of it? Love sees the higher identity of the other. If somebody looks at you that way somewhat regularly, you can be sure they have some kind of love for you. If they seldom or never look at you with that kind of awe and wonder, you know you are dealing with fool's love.

II.) HAVING ANOTHER PERSON'S BEST INTERESTS AT HEART
is the second indicator of love.

This one is so familiar, you will wonder why I bother to mention it. We recognize it as the action side of genuine love, and how marvelous it is to watch love in action! The stories go on forever, and there are never too many of them. Most impressive to each of us are the times somebody else has acted for our best interests, especially when there seemed to be no ulterior motive on their part – except, of course, to see us more like our true selves.

But there are quirks about this quality of love that are hard for some of us to get used to. For instance, love frequently does *not* do what the loved one wants or thinks they want. Love does *not* always comply with what is asked for. That is hard to get used to, whether with love we are giving or love we are receiving. *Fool's* love always does what the “loved” person wants. “I want to go play in the street, Mommy.” “Sure dear, whatever makes you happy.”

We have run into the fact of it time and again. Sometimes the teacher who was hardest on us, loved us most. Most of us can look back on certain occasions when our parents seemed most severe, and we realize now that it was the rigors of love that produced moments of stern discipline. Punishment does not always come from love, to be sure, and it is terrible and futile when it does not. But where there is no discipline, there is no love either.

What happens, of course, is that love tries to treat us according to the higher identity it sees in us. Therefore, it does not always operate according to the present moment or to what may seem most sensible to the majority of people present. If I think you are John Doe, I will tell you “Hey, be peaceful. You have a great father-in-law. Make love to Zipporah, raise children – tending sheep is a good life. Forget the burning bush; it's only your imagination.” But if, behind the facade of you and the moment, I get any glimmer that you are Moses, then I cannot say those normal things anymore.

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Because love tries to treat us according to the higher identity it sees in us, love is famous for being “salty.” Genuine love does not make others weak or dependent. Love is not willing to trade excuses so that everybody can stay lame. You know how it goes: I will not tell on you, if you will not tell on me. I will not expect anything of you, if you will not expect anything of me. Let’s agree to be totally accepting of each other, and then we will not have any trouble.

Love cares too much to agree to such rules. It does know the Silver Rule, however: “Do not do unto others what they should be doing for themselves.” It also knows a Golden Rule, but that is a very high and dangerous precept, and only a few saints can use it without doing more damage than good.

In any case, love does not pander or please or “accept” another, as do the more normal and human levels of cooperation, justice, compromise, and influence. Love often stretches or breaks most of the expected rules of relationship. That’s because love has another’s best interests at heart. And that’s precisely why love is such a troublemaker in our world. Nothing causes more trouble than love, except maybe the evil and fear that try to stop it. Even so, it is usually love that starts the fight.

Right about here, some of us get a new glimpse into the possibility that we might even love our enemies. Their true identity may not be contained in what we are seeing or experiencing from them at the moment. These principles can apply – if we have the love to give. Love will look very different depending on whom we are loving and what the circumstances are, but it is possible in any situation – if we have the love to give. And see how much it depends on the first principle? We *cannot* have another person’s best interests at heart if we do not have some inkling about their true identity and destiny.

As always, in our busy, overstressed, overrushed society, we are often in too big a hurry for the ways of the Spirit and for the ways of love. “Truth, like love and sleep, resents approaches that are too intense or too hurried.” We keep wanting to do loving deeds without first allowing love the time to enlighten us about the loved one. We end up giving jackhammers to poets, property to pilgrims, and slide rules to butterflies.

III.) HAVING APPRECIATION, RESPECT, AND REGARD FOR THE CONTRIBUTIONS AND ACCOMPLISHMENTS OF ANOTHER is the third indicator of love.

“Love is not jealous,” the Scripture reading said last Sunday. Of course, eighty percent of modern Americans flat-out do not believe that. They even work hard to make their loved ones, and even just normal acquaintances, jealous: If nobody wants what I have, then who am I? I mean, what would I show them? What would we talk about?

How marvelous it is when some reward or recognition or applause goes to somebody else and we are as happy about it as if we ourselves had received it. How wonderful it is when some award or recognition comes our way and we become aware that somebody near us is genuinely delighted by it. We are not strangers to such things, but we are not exactly inundated by them either.

How many people could win the lottery and you would be just as happy for them as you would be if it happened to you? If Russia found a wonder-cure for diabetes, would you rejoice at the progress and potential benefit? Only love is able to delight in the gifts and accomplishments of another. It’s the goodness, the excellence, the blessing in others that trouble us even more than their iniquity. Though it is not at all true, we often act as if the success of others threatens us more than their failures; as if the faith of others threatens us more than their doubts; as if the beauty of others threatens us more than their flaws.

It is the ugly backside of this same coin that has troubled me more and more about the way the church approaches so many of its charitable efforts to help people. It is not always the case, but many times our charitable efforts are laced with spoken and unspoken messages that say to those we are “helping”: “You have nothing of value to give back to us. You have need of things we can give you, but there is nothing we need from you. So we don’t listen to you or learn from you. We don’t even have any time we want to spend with you. You are valueless to us, except as *objects* of charity.” When a woman becomes an *object* of somebody’s desire, that is prostitution. The evil is not in the exchange; there is always an exchange. The evil is in treating a child of God like an *object* instead of a *subject*, a person – a being with a destiny, a purpose, and a soul of their own.

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When a poor person becomes an *object* of charity, is that not just another form of prostitution? In our day, the church keeps trying to have a “one-night stand” with the poor instead of inviting them into a faith family. For *ourselves*, of course, we need Jesus and prayer and a faith community and spiritual nurture and the message of hope and meaning we get from the Bible. But we will never mention any of these things or try to provide any of these things to the poor or needy because they have no souls like we have. The only thing they need is money, clothes, food, and maybe medicine. But they would not be interested in any of the things that are the most important things of all to us?

Appreciation is one of the greatest powers in life. Love *appreciates* those it loves: it sees value, glories in even little accomplishments, encourages every good effort. In the long run, that appreciation does more to transform and bless the loved ones than all the *things* love gives.

When you feel appreciated, you know you are loved, even though that does bring with it a kind of pressure – an increased desire for you to go on producing and accomplishing that which you are sent here to produce and accomplish. And of course, love senses that, even as it has sensed something of your true identity.

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So we do not love perfectly, and the people we love are not perfect. But we find ourselves dealing with more than fool’s love with many of the people we know. There are times when love flows in and fills us and, at least for a time, we find ourselves living by these rule-of-thumb indicators:

- Seeing the higher identity of another person.
- Having another person’s best interests at heart.
- Having appreciation, respect, and regard for the contributions of another.

When this is true of the way we feel toward even a few other people, life is good.

That does not confine, define, or explain love, but it helps to clarify some important items. And it means we get to put a lot of people back onto our lists. We do occasionally get glimmers of how

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wonderful they truly are; sometimes we do actually do loving things for them; sometimes when they do well or get real recognition, we are at least as delighted as we would be if we had been in their place. Besides, love has a tendency to grow. That can be a mixed blessing, by the way, but we do not have time to talk about everything on one Sunday.

Now listen if you can, as this is the real point of the sermon: Does it not come clear – is it not easy to see, when we get it lined out like this – how impossible it is to love very much or very often if we have not first given our own life over to God and put its management into the guiding hands of the Holy Spirit? What chance has our love to grow or last in a world like this if we have not decided to trust God for all final outcomes?

Therefore – and this is why the first commandment comes first – *“You shall love the Lord your God”*

From the Christian perspective, this takes on incredible meaning. *You shall love the Lord your God ...* who first and always loves you. How else will you be able to love those who partially and imperfectly and only sometimes love you?

So yes, it must come to the neighbor too. And we all know it and want it and long for the day when it can be more complete. But we cannot do that willy-nilly, by our own power, or according to our own whims or notions. If we like love, want more of it, and believe in its power to transform the world, then we first pay attention to loving the God who first and always loves us.

- Do you see God’s higher identity?
- Do you have God’s best interests at heart?
- Do you rejoice when things on earth go more like God would want them to?
- Do you see Jesus’ higher identity?
- Do you have Jesus’ best interests at heart?
- Do you rejoice when things on earth go more like Jesus would want them to?