

Love

A. Stephen Van Kuiken
North Congregational U.C.C.
Columbus, OH
December 24, 2023

Love is heaven's only power.

Ancient Witness: 1 John 4: 7-21

We have been celebrating the coming of Jesus into the world as an embodiment of hope, joy, peace and today, love. In our spiritual quest to find out more about the meaning and purpose of life, love is a crucial piece of that puzzle. And Jesus can help provide us with some very important clues.

Paul Tillich once said, "In every moment of genuine love, we are dwelling in God and God in us." To experience love is to experience God. To become more loving is to become more at one with God. It was Augustine who said, "Love God, and do what you will."

So, what is genuine love? How do we get there?

Think about a moment when you have felt madly in love. Sufi mystics do this remembering all the time as part of their spiritual discipline. Recall how things revolved around your beloved and how everything else took on a special glow or warmth. A person in this enraptured state would gladly give up everything or do anything for the other, no matter how foolish. In every moment of genuine love, we are dwelling in God and God in us.

Matthew Fox had a suggestion for us:

I propose we fall in love several times a day for the rest of our lives. You could fall in love with the galaxies—there are one trillion of them out there! ...You could fall in love with fish and plants, animals and birds, and with people, especially those who are different from us.

In every moment of genuine love, we are dwelling in God and God in us.

But it is much more than a warm sentiment or feeling. In the words of Frederick Buechner,

In the Christian sense, love is not primarily an emotion but an act of the will. When Jesus tells us to love our neighbors, he is not telling us to love them in the sense of responding to them with cozy emotional feeling. You can as well produce a cozy emotional feeling on demand as you can a yawn or a sneeze.

This reminds me of when my older daughter was younger, sometimes when I did something that she didn't particularly appreciate, she would say, "Daddy, right now I love you, but I don't like you." Now, I don't know where she picked that up, but there was truth to it. Liking may or may not be part of loving. Instead of preceding love, sometimes liking follows on the heels of loving. Practice loving someone you don't like. Try it.

Thomas Merton once wrote,

We are obliged to love one another. We are not strictly bound to 'like' one another. Love governs the will: 'liking' is a matter of sense and sensibility...

If we wait for some people to become agreeable or attractive before we begin to love them, we will never begin. (No Man Is an Island)

Love is always bigger than we think; it is not reducible to mere emotion. There is at least a threefold involvement of love. It is this ethical principle: *to love with all of one's heart, mind and strength.*

First is the involvement of one's *heart* and intuition. Pascal said, "The heart has its reasons that reason does not understand." This is the love that connects hearts. It is beneath and beyond human comprehension and rationality.

Second is the total involvement of *mind* and *will*. This has to do with priorities and commitments. Some things have to be sought first and single-mindedly. Others will follow. "One cannot serve two masters," is the way that Jesus put it. In some ways, love is a decision, a choice that we make.

Third is the principle of loving with all of one's *strength*. Love animates our bodies and sets us into motion. We offer our selves, our talents and gifts. It requires *action*. It can be costly. Sacrificial. "There is no greater love than to lay down one's life for others." (John 15:13)

So there is this multi-leveled involvement—like completing a circuit—starting within and ending with action. There are also *two dimensions*, in which love is expressed—the personal and the political. There are individual acts of compassion and there is the struggle for justice. As Cornel West says, "Justice is what love looks like in public."

Several years ago, a seven year old girl from Guatemala dies in custody of the Border Patrol. Her name was Javelin Caal. She died of dehydration eight hours after her family was apprehended for trying to cross the border. We many never know if she was given the proper aid and attention by the authorities. But we do know that it has been our country's policy, for years now, to use death to deter families from crossing. And I have seen videos of Border Patrol agents destroying life-saving water in the desert and reports of withholding water from detainees.

And love will lead us toward personal compassion toward Javelin and her family, but it will also lead us toward systemic change, toward challenging inhumane immigration policies and laws, toward increasing the flow of the number of immigrants beyond a mere trickle, toward seeing the situation with less fear and more love, not so much as a security threat but as a humanitarian crisis. Love requires borders that are not completely closed, it seems to me. And love requires, it seems to me, stopping the indiscriminate bombing and killing of men, women and children—all holy families—in Gaza.

And of these two dimensions of love, justice is not only the most effective, it is the most costly. As John Dominic Crossan said,

Those who live by compassion are often canonized.

Those who live by justice are often crucified.

So there are different levels and dimensions, and one can say there are also different *kinds* of love.

First there is the kind of love that desires another person or object. Its goal is possession. The Greek word for this kind of love is *eros*. Second there is the kind of love that is mutual that may be based on desire or admiration of another's character, and this is called friendship or *philia*, as the Greeks named it.

The third form of love introduced by Christianity and other religious traditions, emphasized a spiritual connection to all things. It is universal. All are recipients of a love that is unconditional. This love is expansive and cannot be reigned in. As the verse says,

*I was looking for God, but she withdrew from me.
I was looking for my soul, but I did not find it.
I was looking for my sibling, and I found all three.*

This kind of love, called *agape* in the Greek, is reflected in Gandhi's statement, "I am part and parcel of the whole, and I cannot find God apart from the rest of humanity."

So this highest form of love has to do with this universal inner connection to the world. Charles Birch said it well:

Our society is a materialist one. We model ourselves unconsciously on the view of the world derived from the so-called Newtonian universe. That universe consists of separated particles pushing each other around but never influencing each other within. In the society of humans we meet outwardly all the time, but don't really meet inwardly.

Love in its truest form connects us inwardly. It is based on the truth that God touches us all, and we can touch one another physically and externally, but we touch one another through God. There is a oneness, a unity with all things. True love is to feel this and to participate in this. There are no strangers!

This is similar to the Hindu concept of *advaita*: oneness, non-duality. One guru was asked, "How can we love others?" He answered, "There is no other." Many years ago, Dan Clark told a wonderful story:

Once when I was a teenager, my father and I were standing in line to buy tickets for the circus. Finally, there was only one family between us and the ticket counter. The family made a big impression on me. There were eight children, all probably under the age of 12. You could tell they didn't have a lot of money. The children were well-behaved, all of them standing in line, two-by-two behind their parents, holding hands. They were excitedly jabbering about the clowns, elephants and other acts they would see that night. One could sense that they had never been to the circus before. It promised to be a highlight of their young lives.

The father and mother were at the head of the pack standing as proud as they could be. The mother was holding her husband's hand, looking up at him as if to say, "You're my

knight in shining armor.” He was smiling and backing in pride, looking at her as if to reply, “You got that right.”

The ticket lady asked the father how many tickets he wanted. He proudly responded, “Please let me buy eight children’s tickets and two adult tickets so I can take my family to the circus.”

The lady quoted the price.

The man’s wife let go of his hand, her head dropped, the man’s mouth fell open. The father leaned a little closer and asked, “How much did you say?”

The lady again quoted the price.

The man didn’t have enough money.

How was he supposed to turn and tell his eight kids that he didn’t have enough money to take them to the circus?

Seeing what was going on, my dad put his hand into his pocket, pulled out a \$20 bill and dropped it on the ground. (We were not wealthy in any sense of the word!) My father reached down, picked up the bill, tapped the man on the shoulder and said, “Excuse me, sir, this fell out of your pocket.”

The man knew what was going on. He wasn’t begging for a handout but certainly appreciated the help in a desperate, heartbreaking, embarrassing situation. He looked straight into my dad’s eyes, took my dad’s hand in both of his, squeezed tightly onto the \$20 bill, and with a lip quivering and a tear streaming down his cheek, he replied, “Thank you, thank you, sir. This really means a lot to me and my family.”

My father and I went back to our car and drove home. We didn’t go to the circus that night, but we didn’t go without.

You know, when we talk about love, most of the time we’re only talking about a small piece of it. Just a tiny corner of it of a mammoth reality. It reminds me of the discovery years ago in Washington of what scientists thought was the single largest living organism. They discovered that under the surface of the ground of a forest was a huge, continuous fungus that was intermingled with the roots of the great trees in such a way that two trees, miles apart, were linked and connected to each other in a real and undeniable way.

So it is with us. We are connected to our families and friends on an obvious, physical level. But there is a deeper, more profound inner connection that is not visible, that is under the surface.

This connection is beyond our imagination, but occasionally we are blessed with a random glimpse of it. We find ourselves connected at our roots with distant strangers. This is the kind of deep, universal love that Jesus embodied for us. “In every moment of genuine love, we are dwelling in God and God in us.”