

## Is Love Enough?

John 15: 12-17

Is God's love for us enough to meet our needs in times of crisis or weakness? Let me ask you to answer two questions. How do you show love? How do you know someone loves you?

If you were to describe God's love, what would you say? What is love as we would ascribe it to God? You are perhaps familiar with four Greek words that are all translated by our English word *love*. C. S. Lewis describes them at length in his book *The Four Loves*. The first Greek word for love is *storgé*. It simply means affection, perhaps as simple as your love for a pet or as profound as your love for child or your parent. Love is affection. It is a way of saying that God really cares about and for us.

The second Greek word is *philos*. It means friendship because friends express their love through common interests. Friends stand side by side to face the world. It is lovers who stand face to face when they express the third Greek word for love: *eros*. This is the love expressed in passion. Love as *eros* is not erotic, as we tend to think of it. Erotic means that someone else serves to satisfy our desires. With *eros*, our one desire is the beloved and all else falls away before her or him. You are God's beloved.

*Agapé* is the fourth Greek word for love. *Agapé* is self-giving love, Christ-like love. I think of *agapé* as the other three loves – affection, friendship, and passion – but with divine attitude and Christ-like motivation. The Apostle Paul describes such a God-like attitude and motivation in 1 Corinthians 13. This love is patient and kind, passionate and persistent. It never gives up. This love cares more for others than for oneself. It is more *other conscious* than *self-conscious*.

God's love is not envious, boastful, arrogant, or rude. It doesn't want what it doesn't have. This love has self-control and delights in the flowering of truth. It is patient and always looks for the best in others. Love loves memories, but doesn't live in the past through guilt or regret. Remember that God does not live in the past.

Love anticipates the future without living there through obsession or worry. God does not live in the future. Love keeps going to the end. God is present when this love is present. Because love is a verb, God is a verb.

This past week, I did a radio interview. It was an internet, online, talk radio show and I have no idea how many people actually tuned in. I know there was at least one. His name was Evangelist Wade. He was my first caller and his question was, "how can we change those other churches and other Christians who don't do it right?" Well, we struggled through that conversation trying to get to what was behind the question. What was the real question Evangelist Wade was asking? Eventually, he related a story of being rejected by a church for a number of reasons. He was angry and responded by starting his own ministry – an internet radio call-in show of his own, I believe. He still sounded judgmental toward that church.

Anger, fear, and rejection lead easily to a hardening of our personal boundaries into barriers. They quickly become like the ground in my backyard during times of drought – hard and impenetrable. My radio conversation reminded me of Jesus’ story of a farmer planting seeds. Some soil was just too hard to penetrate. Love has to be received. It has to make it inside to the hurting places, the walled off places, the angry places, and the resentful places of our lives. Love has got to sink in to where we are feeling unacceptable and even unlovable.

God’s love for us **is** sufficient to meet our needs, but first it has to reach us inside, at the place of our need. We have to let the love inside. We have to open ourselves and become vulnerable again. We have to risk and take a chance. We have to let ourselves be loved for no other reason than that we are – just because we are.

Let’s return to the scripture lesson for today. Jesus was not a rules person. Just the opposite, he didn’t even leave by laws for a Christian Church. He did not leave a Church at all. There was no structure, just friends. There were no rules, just vectors, directions, perspectives, and relationship. This was true except for this new commandment. “A new commandment I give you, that you love one another, as I have loved you so also love each other.” I want to encourage you not to listen to those who say that this was just an instruction for the in-group, just for a closed circle of believers. Jesus was not about closed circles. He was all about pushing farther out, pushing for a broader scope with everyone included.

“Love one another. There is no greater love than to lay down your life for your friends. And you are my friends,” said Jesus. You are my sisters and brothers, my peers, my equals. The way of love is the way of laying down our lives for each other. It is the way of seeking the good of others, the good of each other. Now, love is not about becoming dependent on each other the way a virus is dependent on its host cell. It is not like cancer’s dependence that becomes destructive. Love is about being dependent the way soldiers are on each other and the way as rock climbers are dependent on each other. Love means thinking about the needs and best interests of others.

You know that I am a performer. This is true not just on stage, but in real life, too. I am a performer just like each of you. Sometimes I find myself, while talking with someone, thinking, “I wonder what this person is thinking of me right now? I hope I don’t say something stupid.” Sometimes, as I walk along and see people, I think, “I wonder if she thinks I’m good looking? I wonder if he thinks I’m someone to envy?”

While I certainly don’t do that all the time, I do often enough to feel very uncomfortable about it. So, each Sunday before I stand in front of you to talk with you, teach you, and learn from you, I have to pray, “Let me get out of the way.” When I am self-consciousness, I care more about what others think of me. But if I care more about what you think of me than what I think is true, then my message is not worth listening to. And as long as I am more conscious of what you are thinking of me than I am conscious of you as you are, how can I love you?

That's the way it is with love. When I am more conscious of you than I am of me, then I'm free to love you. When I am open to you as a person instead of what you can do for me, then I am free to receive your love.

Is God's love sufficient to sustain us in our need, in our times of crisis? Well, love is it! There is nothing else in all the universe for us. We are created from love, for love, and to love. We respond to love. We grow through love and only the hardness of our resistance to love inhibits our growth. Love is our identity because it is the identity of our creator, our God. When we love a sister or brother as God loves -- with affection, with friendship, and with passion for the good of the beloved -- that is when we become fully human.

When we are able to receive God's love through the genuine love of another person, and accept that we are God's beloved, that's when we become fully human -- fully who we can be. That is when we receive healing in our inmost places and know we are loved -- without a doubt and without condition -- fully loved. That knowledge sustains us in crises and need. And we dare to see and know and experience the fullness of heaven right here and all around us.

Poet Elizabeth Barrett Browning wrote:

Earth's crammed with heaven  
And every common bush afire with God,  
But only he who sees takes off his shoes;  
The rest sit round it and pluck blackberries.

When we live life with shoes off, always walking on holy ground, then we begin to see, to know, and to experience God whom to know well is wholeness and healing. This is God whom to know well is life eternal and abundant.