

LOVE IS NOT A THING

There is something nice about a trilogy of sermons about love. But as you have discovered, I never learned how to quit while I was ahead. We must not leave our present question – What is love? – without a parting insight. It changes my perspective quite a bit. It helps me to understand some of my struggles and to be a little more understanding of some of *your* struggles. Sometimes it even helps me to make decisions and set direction.

So, where does love come from? On the one hand, I suppose I sometimes think of myself as the source of an act of kindness or a charitable good deed. It feels sometimes as if compassion wells up within me when I begin to comprehend what another person is going through, and especially when it begins to dawn on me what it would be like for me if I were in their situation. On the other hand, in a generic way I can legitimately presume that since God created all things, the source of all these things is ultimately God. Yet our claims about God being the source of love are more specific and far-reaching than that.

We are not talking about a fleeting mood or a moment of empathy or even a major and costly act of kindness. We are thinking of the kind of passionate, enduring flame that lights our lives and gives them purpose; that impacts our choices year after year; that eventually shapes and defines us even when our awareness is mostly on what we are trying to accomplish for others. Think of lasting relationships – like marriage, true friendships, authentic partnerships.

We hear a lot about betrayal and greed and opportunism. But history has its better stories too. Like David and Jonathan. And apostles who were faithful unto death. What would Moses have done without his brother Aaron? Who can imagine the life of the Apostle Paul without Luke, Silas, Barnabas, and the rest? Not all lion-hearted King Richards had brothers like John.

In the second century B.C., for instance, when the Roman Empire was still spreading and gobbling up every minor kingdom it could find, Eumenes II was king of Lydia (he ruled from Pergamum). On several occasions, Eumenes was absent from his throne for months at a time. On one occasion, he was even thought to be dead. His brother Attalus

managed the kingdom on his brother's behalf, but never was there any hint or intention of insurrection. Attalus was, in fact, his brother's most loyal supporter. Many times Rome sent envoys to bribe, bully, or encourage Attalus to declare himself the king (divide and conquer), but to no avail. Eventually it earned Attalus the nickname (epithet) "Philadelphus" – lover of his brother. The kingdom of Lydia was secure in those days because no one could turn Attalus against his brother. And Eumenes built a city in Asia Minor called Philadelphia, in honor of his faithful brother. It is one of the seven cities in the Book of Revelation. (Revelation 3:7-13)

Not every job is linked with love, but EVERY VOCATIO IS. What keeps the artist painting through all the years when nobody is buying enough to pay for the materials? When I left our UCC Conference to go to Washington State many years ago, Al Cohen was one of our strongest advocates for social justice, and especially for environmental concerns. Coming back years later, I discover that Al is still at it. I do not know how he survives. Though I count him a wonderful and faithful man, we probably could not talk for more than three minutes on any subject without disagreeing. But I would be an utter fool if I did not recognize that it is some kind of love that is driving him.

Love is not only behind the caring we have for some people, it is behind all that we truly care about accomplishing. And while love is never a guarantee that we are right about anything, it is nevertheless always calling us forth, calling us out, and calling for us to use the best gifts and abilities that we have for some person or for some purpose.

This kind of love we cannot manufacture. This kind of love "comes over us"; wells up from some secret source; begins to operate and change our lives without our planning it, deciding it, thinking it through, or understanding it. You perhaps have other language to speak of it, but I have long been convinced that it is the Holy Spirit at work within us. The only source for real love is God.

I want to suggest today that there is one further reason for the difficulty we have in defining and grasping the concept of love: LOVE IS NOT A THING. I was going to title this sermon "Love Is Nothing" – no thing. But considering how often I have been misunderstood lately, I decided I better not try to be playful at the moment. Nevertheless, love is *not* a thing.

LOVE IS NOT A THING

Let's go back to the basic phrase that makes love matter: "I love you." We all know that this declaration can change everything. It can change the way the sun shines and the way the birds sing. It can change a bleak day into poetry and make work seem like fun. It can change where we live and what we are living for. But love is not worth anything unless there is an "I" on one side of it and a "you" on the other. Take away the "I" and the "you" and what are we left with? By itself, love is nothing. Love is not a thing.

The love of God has little impact until we realize that God is the "I" on one side of it and we are the "you" on the other. Love is always intensely personal. It is also specific. If your "lover" says to you, "I love you, but of course I love everybody," somehow that reduces the proclamation. It even bothers us, in the beginning, that God loves everybody. Somehow, a generalized love like that is not very inspiring. Not until we are reminded that God's love for us is unique and tailored to us specifically. It is hard to remember, at first, that God is a being of different magnitude – that God is able to listen to a billion prayers all at the same time, giving each one all the focus and attention that we can manage when we give *one person* our undivided attention. It is hard to remember, when translated down to our comprehension, that God loves each one of us as if we were God's only concern. When that realization breaks through, we become religious.

Speaking of which, it seems to me that the Christian church has been drifting into a terrible reduction of the meaning of love. We have tried to take away the "I" and the "you" and let love stand all by itself as a kind of generalized concept. We have tried to engender a "loving" style of life that has no personal content inherent within it, no personal feeling driving it, no personal motive correcting or inspiring it. Sure enough, it ends up no thing – nothing. We even speak of being "selfless" as if that were somehow commendable or desirable. Would you really like to marry a person who had no self – spend your life with an empty shell? Some days that *might* sound pretty good – for a little while.

Love is about real life and real people. In a relationship, the only thing worse than conflict is *no* conflict. Love cannot exist without beings, people, selves. Selflessness is the death of love. Creeds do not love – people do. Institutions do not love – people do. Rules and morals and manners and a good upbringing do not love – people do.

So take away the “I” and the “you” and what is left of the magic phrase “I love you”? Nothing! Nothing is left. Love is not a thing – it is not an entity. It does not exist without a subject and an object. Real love is always trying to complete a loop. Whoever says “I love you” hopes that the object will turn into a subject and love back. That is the great opposite of the vicious circle. It is love circling, empowering, inspiring, caring – giving and receiving in an endless, spiraling, connecting loop. Even God hopes and longs for that. It is one of the saddest things in life when somebody loves us – I mean really a lot – and we do not love them back. Sadly, that is God’s very frequent experience with this planet and its people. Love by itself is nothing. It is the being on either side of that concept that makes it meaningful.

So love is only a channel that connects two beings. Love is the name we use for the corridor, the link – the power that breaks through the shields, fear, and insecurity and puts people in contact with each other. Love by itself is nothing. If somebody says “I love you,” it does not mean they offer us “love”; there is no such thing. What would we put it in? What would we do with it? There is no such thing. If a person says “I love you,” it means they are offering *themselves*. *They* are the content; love is only the connection. Every person who loves us offers something different from all the others. That is because *they* are different. Even the same person is somewhat different each new day we see them, and they keep changing. If they love us, we get *who* they are and *what* they are.

And if we say “I love you” back, that simply means we take down the barriers – we risk the pain of being known to one another. Love means the channel is open, the shields are down: “Whatever I am or have is available to you.” And of course, we risk the vulnerability of letting whatever they are or have come flowing back through the channel to us, making us *both* exceedingly vulnerable. Love is nothing – and yet love is everything, because love takes us beyond the isolation of our own borders.

Love is terribly dangerous! When will we ever stop pretending that love is always nice or that we always want it? We are never severely and deeply wounded within – until we begin to love. Nobody *ever* truly loves without getting seriously hurt. To love is to come out of the relatively isolated, predictable, secure world of self. Like being born, or being *reborn*, there is no way to do that without some shock – without some surprise and trauma – even if it is exciting and wonderful and full of discovery and leading us into greater LIFE.

To discover that God loves us is to discover that God offers us himself – what God is. Mainly, we receive the gift of God’s presence with us. What more could we possibly want, once we begin to fathom what that really is? In any case, that is where love’s reputation got started. God gives us what God is, and the nature of that contact has become the standard expectation: forgiveness, mercy, grace, peace, constant guidance and caring. “God is love” means that we have come to associate “love” with what we receive from God. If a *human being* loves us, we may not receive all those same things from them, because they are not God. If they love us, we will get what *they are*, not what they are supposed to be or even what they may one day become. Is that not the source of endless misunderstanding?

Somehow we still allow it to surprise us when we receive love from a mere mortal and discover that they do not live up to what we have come to expect from God. You would think we would have more respect for what it takes to develop the qualities of true love. But we get stuck on the word “love” and forget that it simply means we will get what the person *is*, not what some predefined formula says love is supposed to be like. We get what the loving person *is*, not a person carrying some canned commodity called “love.”

Most of us have learned that hate and love can trade places with each other quickly. They have in common the openness – the taking away of restrictions and controls. Hatred also tends to complete a loop, bringing back hate from the one we are hating. But with hate, we give the destructive side of who we are. With love, we give the constructive side. Either way, we open ourselves to relate and communicate and deal dramatically with another. Therefore, hate and love shade back and forth in many relationships, depending on how things are going and on how spiritually developed the people involved are.

From such a perspective, I find many things readjusting and refocusing. Three things in particular stand out.

1.) The first has to do with how people can become more loving. We have already said that love comes from God and that we are able to love only as much as we ourselves have been loved. That matches. When we experience someone giving of themselves to and/or for us, that gives us the courage and desire and capacity to try giving of ourselves – both back to the one who loved us and also forth to others. Love in motion sets up this back-and-forth principle. Is that not true in your experience? Have you not seen it operate with others?

But here in this strange place called earth, it is also clear that our love is not whole. We not only wish to be more loving – more willing to give of ourselves and risk knowing and being known – we would also like our love to keep improving in quality. You know what I mean: less ego in it; less manipulation; a more open-ended trust and freedom. I am not trying to sell it; I believe we all greatly desire to be people with a greater quality of and capacity for love than we have now, no matter how loving we may consider ourselves to be.

With some simple behaviors, we can do better by trying harder. How do we try harder to love better? We can work around the fringes: try to be more patient, listen better, pay more attention, be more considerate and thoughtful. It's sort of like trying to row an ocean liner: "All together now, pull!" Life keeps happening, and such good intentions often fail to make it through a single day.

So how do we improve our love? Eventually it becomes clear that the quality of our love is precisely the quality of our own inner being. Love is only the channel – the link – that allows us to give ourselves. If what goes through the channel is to improve, our inner being must change. The quality of our love depends on our true purpose – our *vocatio* – and the focus of our spiritual disciplines. What do we know? What do we really care about? What are we trying to accomplish? What do we appreciate? What do we truly value? And even beyond that, what sort of person has God designed us to be? What we can be sure of is this: If *we* increase, our love increases. If God gets more of our lives, more of God's love will flow through us.

In other words: To increase myself is to improve my love. To take love seriously means I must spend time paying attention to some of my needs, filling some of my empty places, training some of my gifts and skills. In short, I must learn to love myself and learn to be more selfish – in order to have more of a self to give. I am not talking about becoming irresponsible. I am talking about being responsible *to myself* – or, more accurately, to God who made me – in order that when I love my neighbor as myself, that will be a better experience for my neighbor (as well as for me). Therefore the first teaching, the first priority, the top concern of the church is that each individual member seek first his or her own conversion – that is, give first priority to their own relationship to God in Christ and make sure that they are on an authentic spiritual WAY of Life.

Some people do not yet know that this is the first business and concern of the Christian church. Others do not like it or do not understand why it is. *You* must both know it and understand why. There is no outreach unless there is somebody to reach out. And that somebody must have something to offer and know where it comes from.

Did Jesus do this? We know nothing of Him for the first thirty years of His life. When He finally emerges, He knows the Scriptures cold. He has thought more deeply and creatively than anyone else we have ever seen. He knows His identity and His powers, and they are better developed in Him than in anyone else we have ever seen. After His ministry begins, Jesus gathers around Him the people He needs. He limits His mission to territory He can cover, and He ruthlessly eliminates the rest. Always He goes apart to pray, to rest, to keep centered. Yes, Jesus did all this; He had so much to give to others that the world is still spinning with the tales. But indeed, He did start with His God and with Himself. You must be a self to be able to love. You cannot love if you do not know something of who you are and what you have to give. At least be fair; do not try any kind of love on another that you have not first tried on yourself.

2.) Secondly, I think we have to get it really clear that love does not make everything all right. That is not its function or purpose. We need to know, for instance, that just because somebody loves us – that is, opens the channel from their end – it does not mean we are going to like everything coming through. We must stop assuming and expecting that. Hopefully the more mature we become, the more often we *will* like it, and the more we will want to know another for who *they* are, not merely for our own pleasure or to fill our own needs.

Conversely, we must stop assuming that just because we love somebody, that means they will like what we have to give. We are not offering love; we are offering *ourselves*. And just because we love somebody, this does not guarantee that none of our destructive, jealous, fearful, and threatened side will be coming through to the other. It's good news and bad news. The good news is: I really like you, I want the best for you, and I want to know you, associate with you, do many things together. The bad news is: Everything I have left unresolved about myself – my dark side, my shadow, the fears and guilts I have not yet dealt with – will sometimes sneak across the channel of love too. Only, I will not know it or realize it. If you mention it, I will deny it and blame you. You will do the same with me. And neither of us will realize it.

If love opens the channel, whatever we have left of that stuff will come through with the rest. If we love somebody and the channel opens at our end and if they respond and the channel opens at their end, then they are in far more jeopardy from us than ever before. We need and want to know that, if we really care.

Actually, love wants it this way. That is the nature of the channel. Love invented the “come as you are” party. Love assumes there is a gift hidden within every defect, that healing really can take place, that people really are transformed by the power and presence of God.

So love is a paradox. Love means we take down the shields and barriers. It therefore means we are vulnerable and in more jeopardy from each other than ever before. Trust and be open – and be warned, but go open anyway. That is love.

You see? Impossible paradox. Transcendence is the only hope with any paradox. What do we do when an immovable object meets an irresistible force? We jump dimensions. We transcend. Two people who stay faithful to love’s connection – who keep accepting whatever comes through the channel and keep learning and growing from it – jump dimensions. We are not really destroyed; it just feels like we are going to be. We are smelted, uplifted, tested, increased, transformed – by loving and being loved. That is why everybody *wants* to love and be loved but only a tiny handful will commit to it.

3.) Finally, if we want to love, we need Jesus Christ. This is not a break for the commercial; I am not trying to be partisan. It is just simply true. Not everybody wants love’s connections. I suppose none of us do all the time. We are very good at withdrawing, going silent, withholding, leaving, finding somebody else, and then repeating the first two or ten rounds of relationship over and over instead of hanging on and finding out where it really leads.

In any case, no other religion in the world makes love its foundation and center like Christianity does. At least not LOVE as we have been talking about it. Eastern religions abhor such personal attachment. When they use the word “love,” they mean a nonpersonal nonattachment that will not purposefully harm you and will try to do you good. Islam and Judaism think love might be okay, as a by-product or maybe a reward after all the other really important issues are taken care of. Only Christendom truly wants love, thinks love is itself the WAY, and thinks love is the goal as well as the process that leads to the goal.

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If we want love, we end up needing Jesus, who alone knows and offers the WAY of love; who helps us with our evil and fear; who gives us the kind of salvation that forgives and restores and then sends us right back into loving – always back into relationship – with God, with ourselves, and with each other.

Jesus keeps the channel open – keeps His end open – and He keeps insisting, whenever we pay attention to Him, that we open our end too. We see His love more and more clearly, especially when we throw our own evil at Him. Until, seeing the end of it – the Cross – sometimes, for some of us, it changes our minds and our hearts and our lives. So we come to love Him back – to open up to love’s WAY again. As we keep doing that with Him, we cannot keep from trying to do it with each other also.

Love is not a thing. Love is the channel by which two beings lower the barriers, take away the shields, and give of who they are to each other. Over and over we fail. Over and over He restores us. Over and over we try again. It is called progress, not perfection. But that is love’s WAY.