

*Love, Love, Love*

There's an old expression that says, "Love makes the world go 'round.'" The Beatles sang, "All you need is love." I googled the word love and got more than a billion hits. I googled the word Jesus and got less than two hundred thousand hits. Obviously, love is a popular topic, even "more popular than Jesus," which is kind of strange because Jesus in many ways is the inventor, the author, and the very definition of love.

Before there was anything but God, there was love. God the Father loved God the Son. God the Son loved God the Father. Between the Father and the Son was the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of love. We might say then that love is intrinsic to the relationships within the Holy Trinity. Love is basic, foundational, to the very nature of God Himself.

Insofar as we can attribute motivations to God as we can attribute them to human beings, it seems that love was behind God's decision, His desire, to create. Creation itself is an expression of God's love. Creation is not God. The earth is not God. You and I are not God. Creation, though, is marked with the stamp of our Creator, and we human beings are created in God's image, which includes the capacity to love and be loved.

God created us to be loved by him. We were made to experience Christ's love. God wants more than anything else to be a loving relationship, a loving communion, with us. Imagine that: before the pyramids were built, before the Europeans discovered the Americas, before you were born, God saw you, and knew you, and loved you. God loves you more than you can know. I like the way author Max Lucado expressed it. He wrote, "If God had a refrigerator, your picture would be on it."

God, of course, is omniscient; he's all knowing. So God knew that these human beings He created, these people He made simply so that He could love them... he knew they were

going to let him down. Long before Adam and Eve ate the fruit of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, which God had forbidden them to eat, He knew that these human creatures He loved so much would sin. They would transgress His laws, abandon His teaching, and not love Him in any way like He loved them. Humans would also not be very good at loving other human beings as well.

God knew all that about us and He loved us anyway. In fact, God's love for us was so great that He would not let anything come between Him and us, not even our sin. Before Cain slew Abel, before Pharaoh enslaved the Hebrews, before the angel Gabrielle spoke to Mary, God already had a plan, a plan how His love was going to save us from sin, which is really saving us from ourselves. God was determined not let us be eternally separated from Him and His love.

God's plan was a daring rescue operation. God would come to earth in the person of Jesus Christ and reveal God's love to us. Jesus would truly be the man who lived for others, and his wisdom and generosity and power would win over the people's hearts. Jesus would tell people about God's love, he would show them God's love in various miracles and healings, and the people love God in return.

Actually, God knew that wasn't exactly how it was going to happen. Although everything I said about Jesus was true, people didn't love Jesus or His Father as they should during Jesus' earthly ministry. Sure, there were some people who loved Christ, but their love turned out to be fleeting and shallow. Remember how the rich young ruler who Jesus loved? He turned away from Jesus because Jesus told him to sell all his possessions and follow him, and he loved his possessions more. Remember how Peter boasted he would never abandon Jesus? That same night he denied ever knowing him three times. We don't what motivated Judas, but we do know that he betrayed Jesus for 30 pieces of silver. No,

as powerful as Jesus' teaching was, as awesome as his miracles were, it would take more to elicit human love for God.

What it took was Jesus' death. Jesus said that when he was lifted up he would draw all people to himself. There on Mt Calvary God's love is perfectly displayed for all to see. God the Father loved us so much that he did not withhold His only Son as a sacrifice for our sins. God the Son loved us so much that he endured the cross for our sake. Jesus loved the Father so much that he obeyed God's will, even to the point of death, even death on a cross. And the Father loved His Son so much that he raised him from the dead, and not just him, but also all his friends with him. That's you and me.

Jesus said the greatest love is one laying down one's life for his friends. That is what Jesus did for us. In doing so, he conquered sin, death and the devil on our behalf. Everything that would have separated us from God's everlasting love was defeated by Jesus' ultimate act of love that we call the cross. Just as the cross has become the primary symbol of the Christian Church, so has love become the defining characteristic of the Christian people.

Jesus commanded us, his followers, to love one another. He said that is how the world would recognize us as belonging to him, by our love for one another. The love that we should have for one another should look like the love that Christ has for us. How might we show love in a Christ-like way today?

Of the many aspects we could identify in Christ-like love, perhaps the most prominent is self-sacrifice. What is most unique about Jesus' love is that he gave up his own life for ours. Over the two Christian millennia and in many nations today there are believers who are laying down their lives for their faith and sacrificing themselves to protect their

friends, their fellow church members. In our culture, it's rare that we would have to make a similar sacrifice, but -- who knows? – one day we might.

There are other self-giving sacrifices that we may be called upon to make in our society that are perhaps more subtle, but no less real. Parents caring for their children is one. Providing for and nurturing children physically, mentally and spiritually is a big, time-consuming job. Caring for aging parents is another, as is spouses loving and supporting one another. Being involved in the community for the common good, rather than for self-interest, is another way Christians express their love. All of these involve self-sacrifice; all of these are ways we can respond to Christ in love by loving others as he loves us. That is how we love when we love as Jesus commanded us to. We give up our agendas, our pleasures, our convenience for the good of another. That is love.

Physically love doesn't make the world go 'round, it's gravity, but love is what holds the church and society together. Maybe love isn't all we need, but everything needs love and everything goes better when love is present. I believe that many of the people looking for love, on Goggle and in so many other places, often the wrong places, are really looking for God, looking for Jesus, although they don't know it. Nothing will truly satisfy us until we realize our satisfaction in Christ. We don't truly love until we see how much God loves us. The best loving thing we can do for another person is introduce them to the love of Christ. It's a wondrous, life-giving love. Amen.