



Pilgrimage:

A Newsletter of Christian Spirituality

February 1984

LOVE

Love is central to Christian life: after all, we worship the God of Love. Love has many forms, some of which seem more Christian than others. All too often these days we speak of "making love," by which we mean having sex. Or we speak of being in love. That indicates a passionate affection for someone else. Or we speak of loving lasagne, meaning that we enjoy eating it. We can also love money or success in the sense that we are attached to money or success.

We also speak of loving God. We speak of His love for us. The problem is that we don't always know what we mean by "love" when we are talking about God. Is it like being in love or loving lasagne (or even like having sex)? We think of the Great Commandment: Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart and with all thy soul and with all thy mind. How are we to do that? When we find that a little overwhelming, we take refuge in the Second Commandment: Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself. That is a little easier to get a handle on. We can easily identify our neighbors, and try to love them as we love ourselves.

But even there, it is not so simple. For how do we love ourselves? How do we distinguish the love we have for ourselves from the other feelings and attitudes we have inside? I may think that I am a wonderful person: is that love? Or I may not think I'm really very good at all: how does that tell me how I am to love others?

The most serious misconception about Christian love is that it means we must like everyone. Christians (especially after a conversion experience) set out to live in peace and harmony with all people. This starts out well, with good feelings for everyone. But after a while, it begins

to wear thin. There are people (even in the Church!) who just seem to rub the wrong way. Try as we might, it is well nigh impossible for us to like them. The more effort we put into forcing good feelings for them, the more frustrated we get. We begin to dread the occasions when we know we will encounter them. We begin to feel guilty, especially when we see in their eyes that they know we don't really like them. Then we start trying to avoid them, because they remind us of what we take to be our failure to love. And then we begin to wonder whether it is really possible to live a Christian life.

That, as it turns out, is exactly the right question. Living a Christian life does not require that we like everyone. Jesus never said anything about that. He spoke only of love, a love which is not a matter of affectionate feelings but of action. He braved the Cross because He loved His disciples, not because He liked them. On that basis, I'm not sure He would have found it worthwhile. His love was one of action. It was a love which desired what was best for others. The best thing that He could do for us was to die on the Cross: so He did it. His love was manifested in His doing what was best for His disciples, regardless of what he may have felt for them.

Our Christian love is to be the same sort. Loving others means doing what is best for them. It means setting aside our particular needs and desires, and instead deciding our actions on the basis of the other. Sometimes this means a sacrifice on our part. When we really want to cuss someone out for their stupidity (and they need patience and explanation instead), then we must sacrifice our desires for the sake of the other's good.

This love is clearly independent of what we may be feeling. Sometimes feelings will help us to love; sometimes they will hinder us. We will find it relatively easy to do good things for someone we feel a great attraction for. It will seem the most natural thing in the world. On the other hand, it will be difficult for us to do that for someone we have a particular aversion for. Then our love will be tested. Will it be stronger than our feelings or not?

The challenge of Christian love is to do what is best for everyone else -- regardless of who they are. This begins with our friends. But it must not end there. It must extend to our enemies. We don't like to admit that we have enemies. But there are always those who are somehow at odds with us, whether at work or in some organization or in the Church. There are also the enemies of the Church. These give us the real challenge of our Christian love. We do not feel like loving them. Our feelings push us in the opposite direction: we feel like hurting them, not doing what is best for them. But our calling is to set aside the feelings and act on the basis of Christian love in spite of the feelings. If we fail, we risk finding ourselves on the side of Christ's enemies, those who have rejected His love.

As with all feelings in the Christian life, we must not deny that they are real and are ours. That is the mistake of those who

try to like everyone: they end up having to deny that they have feelings of dislike, anger and even hatred of other people. These feelings must be accepted, acknowledged for what they are. But at the same time, we must not become subject to our feelings. We must be ready to discipline our feelings according to the Christian principles upon which we live. Christian love is one of these principles. It means that we acknowledge our feelings about people. Some we like and some we don't. That is just the way we are. But the acknowledgment is not the end of our responsibility but the beginning. It gives us the emotional basis for beginning Christian love, the love which acts.

By accepting our feelings for people, we can distinguish our feelings from our love. We see that our love -- what we need to do for them -- is not dependent upon our feelings. We can dislike someone and still love them, by accepting the dislike and acting in their best interest anyway.

This Christian love, a love expressed in action rather than feeling, requires forgiveness. If you have to deal with someone you don't really like, your feelings will tempt you to be very judgemental about his actions. In almost anything he does, you can find something to criticize. You see how base his motives are, as you infer them from his actions. When he fails to come to Church (or is late) you think how careless or callous he must be -- and, coincidentally, how faithful you are in always being there on time. Of course, someday you will catch yourself being late. And then you will be quick to find an excuse for yourself: your car had trouble starting, your alarm didn't go off, you were terribly late to bed Saturday night. In your case, it is actually quite understandable that you were late.

For yourself you are ready to excuse the faults, but for your enemy you attribute to him the worst possible motive. If you are to develop Christian love, you must labor diligently to treat him the same way you treat yourself. For you do not know, after all, why he is doing something unless you ask. You must train yourself to forgive what you take to be his offenses. If they begin to bother you, or if you begin to think yourself better than he because of them, then you must make the allowances for him that you would make for yourself. Put yourself in his position. See that there might well be extenuating circumstances. Let go of your impulse to condemn him, and you will be able to begin to love him.

His sins are after all none of your business: he has not sinned against you. They are between him and God. Your development of a forgiving attitude is the means of learning to love him. In these situations, he does not actually need your forgiveness. Rather, you are learning to let him live his Christian life, even as you expect him to let you live yours. As you do that, you will be able to love. Eventually, you will be free from the baggage of your feelings and your analysis (and condemnation) of his motives. You will no longer be bothered when he is late for church. You will be truly free to do what is best for him.

Christian love for other people is not then a matter of feeling good about everyone. It is a matter of doing what is best for them, even when you don't feel like it. It is sticking up for the obnoxious kid in the schoolyard when he is being persecuted, even though it would be much easier to go along with everyone else and make fun of him. It is what Jesus did: He gave His life for people who did not deserve it, the Just dying for the unjust. As Saint Paul writes, we would not die for anyone, though perhaps we would be willing to taste death for a righteous man -- to die that a Mother Teresa might live. But Jesus set us the example of dying for a sinner. That is the standard to which we should aspire.

In loving our neighbors as ourselves we fulfill the Second Great Commandment, which is a stepping stone to the First. (We must not stop with the Second.) Loving God is not really a matter of feeling good about God. Sometimes Christians will be a little afraid of God. Sometimes they will resist His calling for them when it does not fit in with their own plans for their lives. Sometimes they feel as though God has abandoned them, and they may even get angry at God in response. (Job did.) But none of these feelings touches the heart of the love which is required. That is a matter of will rather than feeling. Job questioned and even accused God, but his love never failed. He never stopped believing that God cared for him -- and acting on the basis of that belief.

We should recognize that our spiritual feelings will have their ups and downs. But this need not disturb us. This need not lead us to despair of loving God. If we remain faithful in our Christian lives: that is love. If we continue to resist sin, to say our prayers, to try to love others even when we don't feel like it -- that is loving God. All our efforts in that direction will further discipline our feelings so that our love will be more and more free from the tyranny of the feelings. It will be more and more free to act as it should whatever the feelings.

Our love for God leads us to be obedient to what He calls us to do. That is the expression of our love. For He calls us to do only what is best for us. Our love is our attempt to be faithful to what we know of His calling for us. Again, that is something we do even when we don't particularly feel like it. Jesus probably didn't feel much like spending the night praying in Gethsemane. He was probably sleepy like his disciples. But He did what He was called to do. That is an expression of His love.

Our aspiration is to love God just as Jesus loved the Father. This self-giving, sacrificial, obedient love we learn from Jesus. And in learning it from Him, we share His love. We begin to live His life, "born not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God." By sharing the love of the Son, we are adopted as fellow-heirs and children of God. Adoption is God's action, the action of His love, always working in us that which is best for us.

