

Another sermon on love? Didn't you do a sermon on love just a few weeks ago? Well, we can never get enough encouragement to spread more love in this world. (And we can never get enough songs... ("What the world needs now is love sweet love!") And, of course, The Bible is full of words about love. Love is an inexhaustible topic.... So today just *seemed like a good day* to talk more about it!

A couple disclaimers: We know there are no experts in love. Everyone falls short in some way and we all keep trying to improve. Also, since it is an inexhaustible topic, we can only scratch the surface in a 10 minute sermon; Even as Jesus said "Feed my sheep" (Feed them his commandment to love), I think there is only time for a few appetizers or "small plates."

Disclaimers aside... First of all, when we think of love, I think most of us start thinking about romantic love; lovers get engaged, married, or nowadays at least very committed to each other in a monogamous and loyal way. But love, we know, is much deeper than feelings and romance. So I was reading one of my devotional books, by Melanie Svoboda, a sister of Notre Dame, and I thought, "what are *her* best thoughts about love?" The index proved that she had *many* thoughts on love, perhaps not romantic love per se, but very deep stuff about love!

One devotional was very simple, but memorable, called "On Loving Hyenas." She spoke of a scientist who studied hyenas and said he had come to "love hyenas!" May sound a bit crazy, but it underscores the theory that if we study anything long enough, especially in nature, we can come to see goodness and beauty in it. Does the analogy hold for humans? Well, aside from people who are consistently cruel and destructive, we can fairly easily find some good and beauty in every person. Regarding

love in couples and partners, one insightful book is called “Please Understand Me.” Sounds simple, but it can be hard work: It takes time to really get to know someone, to understand him or her or them. Even with understanding, then the next step is to accept them, respect them, (love them).

This all has to do with being truthful about who we are, about our authentic selves, our strengths, *and* our weaknesses. This is an essential part of love: Loving ourselves, our true self, and then loving others in their true selves. So Sister Melanie has a wonderful thought about *honesty*, as it relates to love. She reminds us that there can be honesty without love (“just tellin’ ya the truth... the truth hurts, don’t it?”) She then says, “But there can’t be genuine Love without honesty.” We can share honesty in a kind, caring, loving way. It’s like the concept of criticism... Criticism can be harsh and destructive, but it can be helpful when it is *constructive* criticism, even loving criticism... parents to children, spouse to spouse, friend to friend.

One more example from Sister Melanie! She points to the passage where Jesus asks Peter if he loves him. She comments that Jesus did not ask how the newly formed churches were going, but Jesus asks a relational question, “Do You Love Me?” Sister Melanie remarks that if the answer to that is Yes, then everything else will fall into place! (She is echoing the words of Jesus: “*Seek ye first* the Kingdom of God, and all the rest will be added unto you.”) When we are in loving communion with our Risen Christ, remembering his stories and words, then the work of the church, teaching and spreading his love, will all happen.

The Gospel story of Peter and Jesus made me think instantly of the song “Do You Love Me” in Fiddler on the Roof. A brief summary would be that Tevye and Golde have been married

25 years. It was an arranged marriage, and Tevye is asking her if she loves him. She responds by saying, “Well, I wash your clothes, I mend your socks, I cook your meals, doesn’t that tell you enough?...”

The main theme in *Fiddler on the Roof* is that Love is much more than romantic attraction and feelings, that Love can indeed grow over time, and that it involves steadfastness in all the daily chores and actions to help one another. It is commitment, loyalty for a lifetime.... being present in life’s ups and downs, “for better or for worse, “in sickness or in health.” Of course this is true in friendship love as well... Are we just fair-weather friends, there just for fun times? Or can we be there for each other in the tough times.

Interesting that Tevye keeps insisting on the question, “Do you LOVE me?” I think Tevye realizes that if they really *Love* each other, (if they have grown in love, respect, honoring, valuing, knowing and understanding) that everything else will fall into place. All the necessary responsibilities and chores of life will be done with kindness, with love... for the rest of their lives.

So how do we remain caring, loving, especially during the tough times that always come. This is where *Divine Love* comes into play. The greatest help we can get is to “Seek Ye first the kingdom of God,” to seek the way of Christ, to commune with Christ, to “love as I have loved you,” he said. It is the spirit of Servanthood and Sacrifice.... It is the spirit of Compassion and Forgiveness. It is the spirit of Patience and Kindness as Paul says to the Corinthians. (1Cor.13).

Divine Love is Compassion, which is critical because we all suffer in some way, and compassionate love says we will “suffer with” another, try to feel the pain of another. (The word Patience,

in the King James Version is “long suffering!)) Patience and Compassion will bear with some of the struggle and pain.

Divine Love is Forgiveness, which is also called Mercy and Grace... critical, because we all make Mistakes. Can we forgive ourselves for not living up to our own ideals, for making mistakes? Can we give ourselves some Grace, and say we are doing the best we can?

Paul sets forth impossible ideals often read at marriage ceremonies. He says: “Love is Patient and Kind”... Yet none of us is patient and kind all the time, We do well to strive and pray for more patience and more Kindness. Then Paul goes on to say what Love is NOT..... it is not jealous, not arrogant, does not insist on its own way (this one stops me in my tracks!), it is not irritable... things that we All Do! Therefore, we are back to the need for Grace, Mercy, Forgiveness! When we accept the Grace of God for ourselves and our own flaws, forgiving ourselves for not being perfect... then we can give Grace to others!

Love truly is the bottom line, or the “heart” of Christianity, the heart of being a follower of Jesus, to love *as he loved* which must include Grace, Mercy, Forgiveness, Patience and Kindness, etc. All we do must be done with Love... Jesus said that the world would know his followers by their fruit, by the demonstration that they love one another. Amen. May it be so.