



When I was a young priest in the late 1970's, I lived in St. Cecilia's Parish in Spanish Harlem with some senior Redemptorists priests who were very good men. They liked to tease me about being young and not really knowing anything. I would respond by joking that they were out of date with the newest thinking of the Catholic Church. I recall that all of us heard the confessions of the children in the Catholic grade school; afterwards, one of the old timers, and I say that respectfully since I am now an old timer, complained, *none of these kids ever seem to confess a real sin; all they ever seem to confess is that they failed to love, share and care.* Half believing it, half just trying to get them upset, I responded, *Jim, that is the only sin. He immediately told me I was worse than the kids.*

In today's Gospel, we hear what I would consider the prime mandate of Jesus on how we are to live. Our Lord reduces the entire moral code of the Bible to two sentences: *Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the greatest and the first commandment. The second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself.* How simple to hear these words; how challenging it is to embrace this teaching in our daily lives.

What does it mean to love God and to love our neighbor? I decided to google a bit about love and here are some quotes I discovered:

- *Love is a widespread incurable disease which is known to affect the mind and sometimes the body. Symptoms may include: Affected judgment, lightheadedness, eye-watering, chest pains, and increased need to be with*

*the person who infected you. Is known to be highly contagious and can be deadly.*

- *Love is being broke together.*
- *Love is a form of amnesia when a girl forgets there are 1.2 billion other guys in the world.*

Obviously, these quotes are bit cynical with some humor mixed in. I think it fair to say today that when most people think of love it is with a sense of the love that exists in a romantic relationship with another person. Go into a card store and you will find shelves of cards that will help you tell another person that you love them. Listen to the songs on the radio, especially if you like country westerns music, and half the songs are about falling in love with someone, and the other half are about having our hearts broken by love. We use the love word rather casually, I often say, *love pizza and chocolate.*

C.S. Lewis, the great English Christian philosopher, in his classic book *The Four Great Loves*, gives some of the clearest understanding of what love means in terms of what Jesus is calling you and me to live.

The first type of love he calls Eros (Greek) or erotic love. This is a love that most of us understand. It is the love that moves us to ask another human being to be our partner for life in marriage. It is a love that moves a man and woman to have children. It is a wonderful gift from God, but one that is based heavily on feelings. Over time however, powerful, feelings by their very nature must lessen or our bodies would wear out. I remember asking a couple when did they decide to marry. One of them responded with a smile: *about five years after we were married.*

Another love is called *storge*. This is another kind of natural love. It is love that is based on common bonds and family ties. We might use the term affection to capture its meaning. A parent loves his/her child. Brothers and sisters love one another. Such bonds are very strong, but we know all too well that they often can break, and families can divide in bitter disputes. I have often heard it said that you never know someone until you share a will with them.

Lewis' third category of love is friendship or in the Greek word *philia* (friendship). It is often said that we cannot choose our family, but we can choose our friends. Very often when I am preparing a couple for marriage, they will tell me that they were best friends before they fell emotionally in love. There are many kinds of friendship and Jesus, because he was both human and divine, had several close friends, including the family of Martha, Mary and Lazarus and the disciple John whom we call the *beloved disciple*. There are many kinds of friendships but if you are truly blessed in your life you may have one or two of what the Irish call *Anam Caras* or *soul friends*, friendships that based on deep trust and commitment to one another. Like all true loves, one must give much to be a good friend.

The final type of love described by Lewis is called *Agape* or unconditional love. It is a love that seeks to love other people even if we receive nothing in return. Although all the loves that I have mentioned are graces from God, this unconditional love is the love that Jesus is speaking of when he says that we are called to love our neighbors, the poor, and even our enemies. There is nothing in return for us such a love other than the great peace of doing God's will. It is not a natural love like falling in love, affection for a family member, or even a friendship. It is to see other human beings as the children of God.

These loves are great blessings, but they are not easily lived. It takes great effort to be a loving spouse, a good family member, a committed friend. Still, to love human beings and seek what is best for them is only done by the grace of God. Yet, it done by you many times. Last week you gave donations to the people of Puerto Rico, the Virgin Islands, Mexico, Dominica. You do not know these people. The only bond you shared with them was a common humanity. Every week people donate food to the food pantry. To me these are forms of agape, the unconditional love that touch our hearts.

A great modern-day lover of the poor, Dorothy Day, described love as harsh and dreadful thing. At first that may sound strange, but we know any love, be it in a marriage, a family, or for any person will cost us sacrifice. Although to love other people is one of the greatest blessings of life, it is not easy. I believe we fail in love because we have not yet let the love of God capture hearts. God is for each one of us: our lover, our Father, and the one who loves us unconditionally. To meditate on Jesus on the cross is to know his love.

Saint Mother Teresa of Calcutta described love in this way: *Spread love everywhere you go: first, in your own house. Give love to your children, to your wife or husband, to a next-door neighbor... Let no one ever come to you without leaving better and happier. Be the living expression of God's kindness; kindness in your face, kindness in your eyes, kindness in your smile, kindness in your warm greeting.*