

## WHERE DOES LOVE COME FROM?

Maybe if we get the “big stuff” out of the way, we can relax and have a real conversation. WHERE DOES LOVE COME FROM? Everybody here knows that love comes from God. God is the Creator and source of all things. Some people do not believe in God, but they do not tend to hang out around here very much. People who do not believe in God tend not to believe in love either, at least not Christian or spiritual love. But I am only a few sentences into this sermon, and it has already jumped into huge complexities.

Is there such a thing as spiritual love? What is the difference between a relationship where two people do a lot for each other, care about each other, fill a lot of each other’s needs – and a relationship of Christian love? One is a really “good deal” – and the other is ... what? “For better or for worse, ’til death do us part” is way beyond a good deal. I have married quite a few couples in my time, and I can never tell, from the outside looking in, which ones are in love as a really good deal and which ones are in love in response to a gift from the Holy Spirit. And it’s not just because I am so dense or stupid. In the early stages, the good deal and the gift of the Spirit are all mixed in together. Sometimes they still are in the later stages too.

If somebody breaks the deal along the way and it is no longer pleasant or pleasing to be together, sometimes a couple splits up over it. Those of us who are bystanders can nod wisely and say, “It was a deal that has gone bad and not a Spirit-driven love.” Maybe so. How nice to have all the clear answers. Only, the Spirit does not coerce or control us or our mates against our will. Do humans ever go through stages or through dark nights? I am convinced that sometimes the Spirit who gave the gift of love sometimes guides a person out of a relationship that is stuck and destructive. Sometimes we have to leave “*father, mother, wife, or children*” or we cannot follow Jesus. At least that’s what Jesus said. (Luke 14:25-26; 18:29-30) Sometimes other humans get in the way of our spiritual Path. Like Peter tried to do, until Jesus called him “Satan.” Like Jesus’ mother tried to do for a while. It is God’s Messiah who says, “*A man’s foes will be those of his own household.*” (Matthew 10:34-39) Is Jesus just throwing out a casual comment, or is He speaking from His own personal experience? “*Even his own brothers did not believe in him.*” (John 7:5)

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We started out by asking: Where does love come from? We all know the right answer: Love comes from God. But it did not take long to get all tangled up the minute we tried to move from theory to real life. And while we all know that love comes from God, the truth is that we do not remember this or think about love in this way most of the time. We think love comes from *us*. We assume that we are choosing to love the people we love, that we are doing them a huge favor, and that they should have enormous gratitude toward us because we love them. I did not say we would admit this out in the open or that we would maybe even admit it to ourselves. But this is the way most of us feel somewhere on the inside, at least a good deal of the time. It slips out in casual comments and in reactions and choices when we get careless. It slips out in how guilty we feel about some of the people we do *not* love. If we are responsible for loving *some* people, are we not also responsible for not loving others?

Where does love come from? Love comes from God. That's the right answer. But if under the surface we think we own love – that we control it, give it, withhold it – then what has God got to do with it?

Time to pause for station identification. We have a Scripture passage to help straighten us out: *“My dear friends, let us love one another, because the source of love is God. Everyone who loves is a child of God and knows God, but the unloving know nothing of God, for God is love.”* (I John 4:7)

You heard the full reading just a few minutes ago. Do you recognize gibberish when you hear it? More importantly, do you recognize gibberish when it is mixed in with deep insight? If you have conservative Christian or Pentecostal friends, they will assure you that the Holy Spirit would never allow any errors to creep into canon Scripture. That is how they know that women are inferior to men, that gays are unacceptable to God, that Jesus is coming soon on the clouds, and that people like me will be thrown into the fires of Hell to suffer through all eternity.

The problem is, this passage is not *entirely* wrong. It has some very deep insights. *“In love there is no room for fear,”* it says. My love for Jesus is far from perfect, but His love for me is incredible, so threatening me with the fires of Hell is a total waste of time. I trust the grace and mercy that Jesus offers us too much to sucker-in to the fears by which so many Christians try to control themselves and each other.

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By the way, this passage from First John (greatly inferior to the Gospel of John) reeks with subtle fear-based persuaders. The theories are absolute and we better live up to them or else! If we love each other perfectly enough, we can be confident that we will “make the cut” on the Day of Judgment – but the Day of Judgment is still waiting in the wings if we do not shape up fast enough or well enough. Is that not also the message in this passage? Yes, the message is that we should love each other, but if we do not do it well enough or if we do not love enough of the people this author thinks we should, then we are liars – and guess where we will end up? Well, if somebody loves me because they think they will be thrown into Hell otherwise, shall I tell you how much I value their love? I wonder if Jesus feels the same way about why people love *Him*?

And then we are handed this crowning piece of amazing logic: I cannot love Jesus or Paul or Luther or Luke or Augustine or Teresa of Avila or Jonathan Edwards or Anne Hutchinson because I have never *seen* any of them – unless I love all the superficial, pretend, cookie-cutter Christians that I *have* seen.

You can tell me that my love is not pure enough, strong enough, mature enough, or whole enough and I will agree with you. But never try to tell me who I do or do not love. Don't you also feel that way? Who I love is something I know better than any observer does, no matter how many Scripture passages they may have written. I can tell who I love by what it has cost me and by how much it has blessed me. And nobody can read that from the outside looking in.

I love some people in this very room far more than they have guessed. But is it a matter of grave importance when I love somebody more than they know? It used to be, many years ago. But the Kingdom is all around us, and this is a broken world. This world has an end, but the Kingdom has no end. There is less and less reason to be impatient or to be alarmed. We care more and more, but that does not bring us to grief or despair the way it used to. And I know better than most that my love is not what really matters. It is the love of God revealed in Christ Jesus that transforms us, lights our lives, and carries us into the Kingdom. Oh yes, I think God's love is sometimes reflected in our love, but that does not make our love the real source. If some people are drawn to the love of God because of our love, then well and good. If not, they need to find a better connection. After all, we are not God's Messiah. We are only His followers.

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So back to where we started. Where does love come from? Love comes from God. The real source of all genuine love comes from God. Is that worth knowing more deeply? Is that worth musing about? People belong to God – all of them. God is their Author and Creator. I have known this ever since I was a little boy. But it is amazing to me how difficult it is to keep this clear and in focus, even still. One bad headline or one friend telling me how someone has been treating them, and I am ready to assume that in this particular case, that other person does not belong to God. If someone annoys me, do they cease to be a child of God's? At least God's love for them should be temporarily suspended, don't you agree?

Alas, it should be easier for me than for most. I was raised a Quaker. We did not have formal creeds, but we had our creeds. "There is that of God in every man (person)." The "inner light" – what most of us would call the Holy Spirit – was at work in every single person we would ever meet. I grew up being taught and told that, and believing it. Yes, often the inner light was cloaked or muted or chained in a back room somewhere inside the soul and ordered to keep silent, but it was always there and always at work. Our notion of "evangelism" was different too. We never had to start "from scratch." We never had to convince someone of something they did not already know. We never thought it was a matter of persuading someone to believe something they did not already believe somewhere deep inside. We only had to find some way to touch, to awaken, to connect with the inner light that was always and already there.

So it should have been easier for me than for most to know and remember that everyone belongs to God. I still appreciate it and breathe a deep sigh of relief when I do remember. No person belongs to me, owes me, or will ever be their true selves by pleasing me. They belong to God. My truest desire for them is that they know and please God. Of course, that frays very quickly whenever I forget who they really belong to. And when I forget, whatever love I have for them is instantly corrupted – until I remember.

I am not at the true center of any relationship. In my right mind, I no longer want to be. No good can come from that. I cannot truly help any person – bless or improve any life – unless somehow a relationship with me encourages another person to know and trust God's love for them more and more. Right or wrong, I know and believe this. Therefore some of you find it difficult to understand my approaches and reactions to causes and efforts that claim to be helping others.

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There is no such thing as a woman who is not one of God's daughters. There is no such thing as a man who is not one of God's sons. To be sure, many do not yet claim this identity for themselves; they do not have the bearing or the manner of someone who knows it. But they do not have to know it in order for *me* to know it. They do not have to know it in order for you to know it either. "Our Father" is more than a ritual prayer. It is one of the secrets to how Jesus saw life – one of the secrets to how He saw other people.

All kinds of dynamics and all kinds of games can seem natural and understandable between a man and a woman, for instance, but if one or both of them remember that they belong to God, it changes the flavor of everything. They may be falling in love (as we say); it may be the Spirit's gift; they may be heading straight into marriage. It still changes the flavor of everything. To this day, things come into a better focus and I am blessed when I remember: Ah, Mariana is not just my wife; far more profoundly, she is one of God's daughters. God's ownership, position in her life, and relationship with her always outrank my own. God's love for her is greater than my own, though truly I cannot comprehend that.

What has any of this got to do with love? Did I suggest or imply that I was going to explain or train you in love? If so, please forgive me. I certainly do not intend to imply such a ridiculous thing. Authentic love is one of the marks of the Kingdom that is both here and beyond us. We experience some dimensions of love, but love is also a mystery that exceeds our understanding – that draws us toward dimensions and realities far beyond our own.

Most of us have some good relationships in which we try to do good things for others, and they do some good things for us. That is a really good deal. But that is not the full spectrum of love. A good marriage is a really good deal – one of the best. But love goes way beyond that.

Sometimes we try to make good deals with God. I highly recommend it. Lots of people have pretty boring and barren relationships with God because they never make any good deals with God. God is very trustworthy, and if we make a good deal with God and keep our end of the bargain, we will never come out the loser – not in the long run. That ends up being a better relationship than most people have with God. It is far superior to the "you do for me, but I never have to do anything for you" that most people try to work with God.

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But a good deal is still a far cry indeed from the grace and mercy of God. God's Messiah comes with offers and invitations we cannot possibly earn or ever live up to. Even "my life for yours" is hardly a fair exchange when we are in the presence of Jesus.

I am just trying to say that love goes way beyond all deals, all trades, all fair exchanges. Authentic love is in the realms of spiritual realities, in the realms of mystery, in the realms of God's Kingdom coming. When God says "I love you," life itself morphs into unknown dimensions, challenges, blessings, possibilities. Only, we have to die to this world and its limitations or we cannot clearly hear God saying it. That is, among other things, one of the core realities of Christian baptism.