

Sermon, Easter 6. May 9, 2021
Church of the Ascension, Chicago
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“This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you.” John 15:12

I suspect that many of you, like me, have fallen “in love” over the years. When I have fallen in love, I have tended to lose a sense of perspective, and became overly emotionally occupied with the object of my love.

I have learned in this kind of experience that romantic love is a transitory state of bliss, often associated with suffering and angst. I have also learned that romantic love can be mercurial, impulsive, and unless it matures, lacks the depth necessary to stay in relationship.

The writer of Epistles and the Gospel attributed to St. John in the New Testament, has plenty to offer us about the nature of love itself. What he has to say brings into sharper focus the differences between romantic love and Christian love.

The love Jesus invites us into this morning is given to us as a commandment, and so it is a love that has a particular kind of claim on us. It is an imperative.

Jesus is requiring us to move from the experience of being “**in love**” to the experience of “**loving**”. He commands that we be motivated by a manner of loving, that differs sharply from the kind of love that always needs to see *ourselves* reflected in our beloved.

I in no way want to leave you with the impression that romantic love has little to do with Christian love. Nothing could be further from the truth.

I only want to suggest that Christian love is very much about the JOINING of the emotional experience of being “in love”, with the maturing that comes with the intentional experience and commitment “to love”.

Those who have spent many years living into the demands of love, know that the maturing of love in each of us is the long result of time, and it is most especially fulfilling when romantic love deepens into the love that the Gospel invites us into.

Those of us who have experienced that transformation over time, - from being in love to the experience of loving, are extraordinarily blessed. I’m certain we all know people, by the very character of their relationships, who bear witness to this transformation.

Throughout our lives, and I think especially as we mature, we learn that there is no escape from love’s influence over us. Because love’s emotional hold is so strong, and so connected to our struggle to find our place in the world, and to establish the kind of fulfilling relationships we want and need, we are all subject to love’s vulnerable power.

The Christian faith simply proposes that living into love is an area of our lives in which there is a genuine need to make some choices.

A person from the Christian tradition, who I think can be especially helpful to us as we consider the affairs of the heart this morning, is St. Augustine of Hippo, who lived in the fourth century. He's the one who famously said, "O Lord, make me chaste, but not yet."

"I cared for nothing but to love and be loved". Wherever I go it is love that draws me. Love cannot be idle. What is it that moves absolutely any person, even to do evil, if it is not love? Show me a love that is idle and doing nothing. Scandals, adultery, crimes, murders, every kind of access, are they not the work of love?

. . . . Am I telling you not to love anything? Far from it! If you do not love anything, you will be dolts, dead people, despicable creatures. Love, by all means, but take care what it is you love."
(St. Augustine. Confessions, /ii in ps. 31.5; PL 36, col. 260.)

Here St. Augustine is reminding us that when we begin to love someone or some thing, our moral center is at stake. This is precisely what our collect for today is stressing, when we pray that we may love God "*in all things and above all things*"

St. Augustine believes the danger of spiritual disintegration arises in us when we begin to love, because what often, in the beginning looks like relationship, often becomes a source of deep conflicts and discord within ourselves and with others.

Here once again, we learn that there is a kind of love that can be volatile, erratic, and disordered.

This is not the character of Christian love. Christian love is an experience of being in relationship with others that makes demands on us, a commandment involving commitments and the grace to keep them.

Sometimes what we call love, can often present itself as a desire to dominate others, and to exercise power over them. This kind of love, this desire, is instinctual and will always require our attention and restraint. It is a natural tendency in us and does not reflect the transformation so much a part of our baptism, in the new and risen life, and in the life of the Spirit.

Unlike romantic love, Christian love primarily seeks to open us up to others, to those beyond our inner circle. And so here we need to make a connection between our love for God and our love of neighbor, which is what I think Christ is pointing to when he lifts up the importance of friendship in his relationship with us.

Christ says he is our friend because in true friendship there is an establishment of trust and fidelity, of commitment, of knowing what the intention of the other really is. True friendship always leads to the realization that we can entrust ourselves not only to God, but to another person. In this instance Christian love and friendship are interrelated. Blessed is the one whose lover is also their true friend.

In consideration of the relationship of friendship and Christian love, I want to draw upon one more resource, St Aelred of Rievaulx, a monk who lived and loved in the 12th century, just as the notion of romantic love was becoming popular.

“Let us be clear” he says, “about the kind of friendship, which is entered into without reflection, never submitted to sound judgment or ruled by reason, swept on through everything by the impulse of feeling, and hence dropped as easily as it was begun. Friendship”, he says, “is always about human and divine things. A kind of affection that shows itself in action amid the concerns of a shared life.” Re: *Asking The Fathers: Aelred Squire; ; Morehouse Barlow. Page 78*

Once again, we are invited to reflect profoundly upon all the loves in our lives, and their impact on our Christian identity.

We will want to attend most especially, if we are so blessed, to the one we are “in love” with, and who is “in love” with us, and to exercise the holy attention that Christian love and friendship asks of us most especially in these kinds of relationships.

In the arena of friendship, we men may also be called to consider anew how the ideal of Christian love and friendship fits into our general relationships with all women in particular, and how the Christian Gospel informs these kinds of relationships.

Our capacity to love ought to always relate us to others, to the world, and to God, and not simply to our own unfulfilled and instinctual needs. Love, as the Gospel understands it, always has its center outside of us, in the ultimate mystery of God. On this Mother’s Day, we are reminded that parental love, is a profound reflection of Christian love, depicted in the icon of the Madonna and child. Loving our children above our own needs and desires, is at the heart of Christian sacrificial love.

I want to end by returning briefly to romantic love once more. In the recent movie, *To The Wonder*, one of the characters in the movie, a priest, comments on the potential we all have in our lives for the personal transformation of romantic love.

“Love” he says, “is not only a feeling, love is also a beauty. To commit yourself to it is to run the risk of failure, and the risk of betrayal. The one who makes a mistake (in love) can always repent. You fear your love has died. Perhaps it is waiting to be transformed into something higher. Awaken the love that sleeps within you” *To the Wonder*, film; 2012; written and directed by Terrence Malick.

There is great wisdom here. I think our fictional priest is bearing witness to a love that dwells deep within all of us, a love that finds its origins in God, and in our being created in the image of God. It is this deeply seated reality about being a human being that gives being “in love” the potential to give birth to “loving”. How blessed we are when we know this love in our relationships with that one special person, and in our friendships. The risen life in Christ daily invites us into this extraordinary transformation. Amen.