

There are words in the English language that I believe are over used, like the word “like.” You might over hear a conversation where everything is “like I don’t know if the color is right, like it is so intense, yet the dress is like epic.” The word like has become a great thought spacer for those unable to find a more appropriate adjective. Another word over used, in my humble opinion, is hate. Hate is such an intense emotion, the word implies something beyond rage or distress or loathing. I believe that for something to be hated it must be classified as an abomination. The application of the word hate to genocide strikes me as being appropriate. But the application of the word to a vegetable, or a style of music, or clothing, doesn’t necessarily compute.

One word that I am hearing more and more is the word “love.” Like hate the word love implies a very strong emotion or attachment, which causes me to scratch my head when I hear it applied to an inanimate object such as a car, or house, or a tool. There are those who use the word rather than a person’s name. This might be okay if one has a special relationship with a person, but I find it hard to grasp when a waiter calls me “love.” There are those that sign cards and letters with a quick “love ya’,” which makes me wonder why they would end a note with such an endearing term when they really don’t like being in that person’s company.

There are those who think of the word love only in romantic terms. For them romantic love is the only type of love that matters. Then again there are those who use the term to imply a sexual tryst such as presented in Stephen Stills 1970 song, *Love the One You’re With*, which resonated with many hippies who were into the peace and free love movement. In case you don’t remember, included in the refrain are the lines; “If you can’t be with the one you love, love the one you’re with.”

What I find heartwarming is the number of people who genuinely use the term love to imply a strong affection for another without implying romance or anything sexual. Their use of the word implies a sense of joy, respect, and admiration for the other person, just for who they are.

The members of the Corinthian church had a hard time accepting people for who they are. They ranked people based on the gifts they had. For them those that spoke in tongues were considered to be the most important members of their faith community. If you didn’t speak in tongues then you obviously were not blessed by the Holy Spirit and so were deemed to be inconsequential.

But Paul is not having any of this hierarchical view of gifts and narrow determination of worth of the members of the community. Each has a gift needed to make the community whole. If all anyone did was speak in tongues without anyone to interpret what is being said no one would ever know what they were all talking about. And if there was no one with the gift of hospitality in the group there would be no one able to open the building, turn on the lights, crank up the heater, and welcome the tongue speaking folks

So Paul gets to the point. If I speak in tongues but do not have love I am no better than a noisy gong or a squeaky gate. If you perform miracles or are filled with God's wisdom but you don't love it is all for naught. Without love your actions are selfish and self indulgent as you are only into pleasing yourself rather than thinking about serving the community, meeting the needs of the community. Stop categorizing people. Stop ranking people. Stop thinking you are God's gift to the community. Remember we are one; we are united, as the body of Christ.

Paul's understanding of love is that it is not an emotion but a way of life. Love in Paul's mind is the glue that holds everything together. This love we share with each other is made possible because of God's love for us. As Professor Paul Sampley attests in his commentary on First Corinthians, "this type of love originates from God and is shared and realized in community, Paul's notion of love never stops on just one person, love always begins with God and always reaches beyond self to others."<sup>1</sup>

When we think about the great commandment, where Jesus tells us to love God with our total being and to love our neighbor as we love our selves, we often wonder how this can happen. To love as God loves is such a challenge for us. We wonder how we can love another when we don't necessarily like ourselves. How do we love a person whose values, way of life, or whose ideas are so counter to our own? How do we love when it has been ingrained in us that the other person is the enemy, someone to be feared? How can we love a person who has committed a heinous crime?

Which is why I find Paul's words so helpful. They are not just nice words to be read at a wedding. They provide a true definition of what love is all about. According to Paul, love is meant to build up, to educate, to improve, and add to the community.<sup>2</sup> Love never begins with what is best for me but what will result in the greater good, for the community.<sup>3</sup> This understanding of love, Paul

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<sup>1</sup> New Interpreter's Bible in Twelve Volumes, Vol. X, (Nashville; Abingdon Press, 2002), 957.

<sup>2</sup> 1 Corinthians 8:1

<sup>3</sup> 1 Corinthians 10:24

reinforces throughout this first letter to the Corinthian church. He also makes it clear that to live a life of love means we put away our childish ways. Love, true love, calls for maturity and an ongoing determination to growing in our love and understanding of God so that we grow in our love for others. And by the way if you think you know everything about how this world operates, and if you think you have a lock on what God is all about, it is time to consider how limited our knowledge is, do put yourself in the category of being smarter than God, for Paul makes it clear, you are not!

Paul's message about love is one we need to take to heart especially in our very divisive world.

So what makes love, love? I want you to think about a very close friendship. This is a friendship where you are able to be with each other, even in the ebb and flow that life presents, as you are able to talk through your differences. Such a friendship is one where you enjoy each other's company and yet are able to overlook each other's foibles. Your differences are not important, as you do not see them as stumbling blocks but as enhancement to your relationship.

Such love is patient; that is long suffering and enduring. This type of love is kind and caring. It is not envious, as it does not want what is not ours to have. There are no swelled heads or arrogant thoughts or tantrums. Such love does not insist on my way or the highway. True love doesn't fly off the handle, or is irritable, or resentful, or gloats at the wrong doings of others. Love rejoices in the truth. Or as Eugene Peterson's paraphrase of Paul's letter says, love takes pleasure in the flowering of the truth, always is looking for the best in others, is hope filled, and keeps going to the bitter end. This type of love is lasting, it does not die even though everything else we take pride in will eventually go away.

I think the best example of the enduring nature of love is when I think of my Dad. As a salesperson for a national meat company he was intense, competitive and aggressive. But for the last 14 years of his life he lived with Alzheimer's. Dad did not remember his name, the name of his children, nor did he recognize our faces. But he was very sensitive to emotions. If you approached him with a smile and warmth in your words and compassion in your eyes, he brightened up and thought it was the best day ever. However, if a person was angry or aggressive in actions or speech he would intervene, and try to calm the person down, he did not like anyone being treated harshly.

My Dad's actions underscore, that this type of love does not imply that one is a sissy or that you will let others walk all over you. The love Paul is talking about

does not ignore the injustices in the world. This is a love that speaks up when one is being abused or used, or when the actions or words of others diminish the ability of a person to live fully into whom God has called them to be. For when one in the community suffers, all suffer, and so the community is diminished.

And while the world may not embrace this definition of love and while certain groups would rather remain separated from one another, we, as members of the body of Christ, need to embrace this way of life and persevere in the face of apathy, prejudice and fear. Which means we need to reflect on and confront our indifferences, our own prejudices and our own fears, so that we are able to make room within us to embrace others for whom they are.

And no we won't convert the world to this way of thinking, but if we can break down one barrier, by truly listening to one another, truly being present for one another, sharing God's love with one another, we will change the world one person at a time.

The 2007 movie entitled *Arranged* underscores the power that conversation and true listening can have on changing the hearts and minds of individuals. Two women, one an orthodox Jew the other a practicing Muslim, are first year teachers at an elementary school in Brooklyn, New York. Over the year they learn to spend less time focusing on their differences and prejudices towards one another and more time seeing what they have in common, including the marriages being arranged for them by their families. Through this year of growing they end up developing a loving friendship that endures through marriage and the raising of their children.

Through conversation, through having the doors of our hearts and minds truly open we learn that love is the answer to the problems in our lives and to the problems in our world. Let us be open to God's love so that it will flow from us into all corners of the world, making this world God's world, one person at a time.  
Amen