

With Valentine's Day around the corner, a few thoughts on Love seem appropriate. I remember in grade school that the day came with mixed emotions. It was fun to get tiny candy hearts with short sayings on them, like "cutie-pie," or "be mine!" I remember strange feelings and questions about giving or receiving cards: like do you give them to friends, or just to someone you want to get closer to? Hmmm. And I'll never forget one Valentine's day at Princeton Seminary when one student resurrected this grade school custom by passing out Valentine cards to students in our dorm building; I shuddered upon receiving one from her, thinking, I'm not interested in you in that way... and ... Surprise surprise! Wouldn't you know, on the inside, the card said "JESUS LOVES YOU!"

Actually, it IS one of the principal teachings of the Bible, that God is love, that Jesus came to love us, and that we should likewise love our neighbors as we have been loved. There are many kinds of love, and important distinctions were actually being made by my seminarian friend many years ago. Valentine's Day often brings up thoughts of "romantic" love... Hallmark insists that we buy cards and gifts for lovers and spouses, and candy companies likewise cash in with an abundant supply of sweets. The Greeks had at least 3 words for love. "Eros" is used for romantic or erotic love. "Philia" is used for friendship love, as in Philadelphia, (brotherly love). Then there is the word for love used most often in Christian scripture, the Greek word "Agape." For spiritually minded folks, this is the highest form of love, since it refers to unconditional love, selfless love, even sacrificial love, etc. It is Jesus' kind of love, and Jesus said the greatest love is to give your life, to lay down your life, for another!

The famous passage that was read this morning is often chosen at weddings, the famous 1Corinthians Chapter 13: Paul's lofty ideals about love! What the couple often does not realize is how impossible these ideals are! Paul defines Love by saying what it IS and what it IS NOT. "Love is patient and kind." Those ideals are profound, and next-

to-impossible! (Oh Lord, give me patience, and I need it now! All of us have many situations impatience gets the best of us!) The word patience has roots that mean “long suffering.” Patience is a sacrificial part of Agape Love... (For “patient,” The Message translation says “Love never gives up”). Then we come to “Love is kind.” (The Message translation says: “Love cares more for others than for self”). Kindness looks to the needs of the “other.” Kindness involves compassionate listening, listening well to what is behind another’s words or actions. Patience and Kindness are both part of Agape Love, which is a *selfless* love, hard to be consistent about this.

We find it next to impossible to avoid the things Paul says love IS NOT: “Love is not selfish.” (The Message: “Love doesn’t always think ‘Me first.’”) This is hard to do, since survival and personal growth do involve looking to our own needs. “Love is not irritable” (The Message: “It does not fly off the handle!”) ... Sure the ideal may be is to keep a calm head, yet, who among us does not lose our temper from time to time? “Love does not insist on its own way” (The Message: “Love does not force itself on others”) We all want our own way and sometimes we insist on our way... “my way or the highway!” But Agape Love will often put the needs and interests of others before our own, and will never force an issue with threats and domineering behavior.

Moses and Jesus and Paul went even further, adding words that include loving enemies! Moses said it in Leviticus 19:17-18 “You shall not hate your brother in your heart, but you shall reason frankly with your neighbor. Take no vengeance nor bear a grudge, but love your neighbor as yourself.” Jesus was clear about praying for enemies, Jesus lived a radical kind of love ... not only forgiving love, but sacrificial love, a love that will even be willing to die to keep on loving. Paul and Peter both advocated not returning evil for evil, but doing good to those who hurt you.

Radical love is willing to make friends across boundaries of race and class and creed and culture! I reflect again on our predominantly white city, and most of us grew up in similar towns. For me, college was an opportunity to broaden horizons, and perhaps the most multicultural experience I had was later at Princeton Seminary. There we had students from all over the world, representing many cultures, colors, and languages. It was miraculous that Love did unite us to some extent; our common confession of showing Jesus' kind of love did unite us like probably nothing else could.

I also remember going to a missions retreat at Lake Winnepesaukee, where there were representatives from all over the world, people related to our United Church of Christ. I remember mostly the final communion service. Over and above all the seminars and discussions that we had, breaking bread together in Jesus' Spirit at the close of our time really solidified our promise to be more unified, by remembering Jesus' "Agape, Self-giving Love." Yes, we knew Jesus loved each person there, and that we could do a better job of loving one another, even with our many differences.

I do enjoy getting to know people of different cultures. I think that is where inclusive love often starts: Loving people who are different from ourselves.. which is everyone, really! Yes, embracing diversity! This means differences in color, in age, in economic class, in religion, in gender (and now we could say in gender identity). Each of these we could talk about for hours, but we know the root of embracing diversity could very well be simply listening to another... listening well, listening respectfully, listening with genuine curiosity to get to know someone else's story.

Let me share with you that old song that I wrote when I was leaving the multicultural mission conference at Lake Winnepesaukee. I knew there had to be a good tune to that marvelous retreat on the theme of "Building Bridges," so I found myself stopping along the side of the road with pen and notepad, all the way home! I had a

chorus and 2 verses done when I was hungry for some lunch and stopped in a small diner. “Coincidentally,” the hostess led me to a booth with a painting of a *bridge* over a stream, and an older man holding the hand of a youngster as they walked over the bridge together! Yes, it became the final verse of my song!

BUILDING BRIDGES, by Ross Varney

Chorus: Building bridges, moving forward, always on the road to peace. Loving spirit is uniting, bridge of peace from you to me.

*1. Love will be our teacher, love will lead the way. Both in joy and sorrow, love is here today! **Chorus.***

*2. First you were a stranger, now you are a friend. Any fear is cast out, love wins in the end! **Chorus.***

*3. Though there may be danger, a river deep below, with your hand and with God's help, we can cross, I know! **Chorus.***

We all need “allies” as we build bridges with our greater human family. We need like-minded souls, elders and mentors to hold our hands, as we do the work of showing love, Agape Love, to all our neighbors. May Agape Love be part of our Valentine’s observance this week!

Let us Pray...