

Ah...love. We all remember our first loves, don't we? The sweetness and intensity of being in love for the first time; thinking of one's beloved all the time; talking on the phone for hours; writing love notes. My first love was a good and sweet boy. I remember feeling so full and complete when I was with him. I felt like there was more of me when we were together. My thoughts were consumed with him – I wanted to be with him all of the time and I felt like I would do anything for him. It felt as if we were two parts of one perfect and greater whole.

I remember us driving around in the car at night. He had a convertible and we would drive the dark country roads outside of Hillsborough, NC, with the top down and listening to music. It was early summer and the evenings were cool and the air soft. The stars were bright as the scenery alternated from dense forests to moonlit fields. It felt like we were the only people in the world, encapsulated in our gentle bubble of love. On the car stereo, we listened to Peter Gabriel's album, *So*. The music filled the car and our world as we listened to the songs, *Red Rain*, *Mercy Street*, *Sledgehammer*...and especially, *In Your Eyes*, one of the definitive love songs of my generation.

In this song, Gabriel sings of a love so deep and consuming from which there is no escape. The only balm from the ache of separation may be found in eyes of his beloved – it is only there that he feels complete and at peace. The refrain goes like this:

In your eyes... the light, the heat
In your eyes... I am complete
In your eyes... I see the doorway to a thousand churches
In your eyes... the resolution of the fruitless searches
oh, I want to be that complete
I want to touch the light, the heat I see
In your eyes

Like many teenagers and young adults, I swooned at these lyrics. I have to admit, I still do. Oh, how the intensity of young love was so consuming. It was such a new feeling; a new way of understanding my place in the world. As I knew and loved another with the intensity and consuming passion of being in love, I also knew myself in a new way: I was now one in union of heart and spirit with another. Losing myself in another – in this amazing union with another - I found I was both less self-focused and, conversely, more myself than I had been before.

Something like this sort of love and life is what the Gospel of John is concerned about. In his gospel, John tells us that God first loved us and that it is our response to that love that brings eternal life. In what may be the most well-known verse of John's Gospel, Jesus proclaimed: "For God so loved the world that he gave his only son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life." (3:16) And John goes even further by explaining that the totality of this love is never more fully expressed than in self-sacrifice; as Jesus taught, "No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends." (15:13) The sort of love that can lead one to lay down one's life for another is the kind of love that comes from profound *union* with another, for this union is something like the oneness that Christ enjoys with the Father.

Renowned mythologist Joseph Campbell, in his famous interview with Bill Moyers in 1988, told a story that illustrated how self-sacrifice is linked to the awareness of union with another. Campbell says this story gives insight into the great existential question of how a human being can so participate in the peril and suffering of another that he will sacrifice his life. When Campbell was living in Hawaii, two police officers were driving a mountain road and came upon a man who was about to jump to his death from a great cliff just off the side of the road. They pulled the car over and one officer jumped out of the car and ran over to grab the man just as he jumped, and was himself being pulled over the ridge.

He would have gone over if the second officer hadn't then grabbed him and pulled the two of them back. Later, this first officer was asked, "Why didn't you let him go? You would have lost your life!" And his answer was "***I couldn't let go. If I had, if I'd let that young man go, I could not have lived another day of my life.***" In that moment, in that split second, everything else in this man's life dropped away: his duty to his family and to his job...all of his wishes and hopes for life, just disappeared. Campbell described what happened in that moment as a "metaphysical realization that you and the other are one. And that the separateness is only an effect of the temporal forms of sensibility of time and space. And true reality is in that unity with all life."

True reality is in that unity with all life. I would sacrifice myself for you because the true reality is that you and I are one. In writing on love, Frederick Buechner observed, "To lose yourself in another's arms, or in another's company, or in suffering for all men who suffer, including the ones who inflict suffering upon you – to lose yourself in such ways is to find yourself. Is what it's all about. Is what love is."

That is the love command in action. That is the love which Jesus gave and the love to which he calls us when he says to his disciples: "This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you." Buechner goes on to say that Jesus isn't telling us to love in the sense of responding to each other and our neighbor with a warm and cozy feeling. Rather, he is telling us that we love by being willing to work for their well-being, even if it means sacrificing our own well-being. In this way, we are able to love our neighbors without even necessarily liking them.

And still, we are unnerved when we hear Jesus' command to love one another as he loved us. What is scary about this kind of love is that, when we honestly think about it, we are not so sure we can do it. It sounds so simple, doesn't it? We should love others as Jesus has loved us. But like most profound truths, it may be simple, but it's not easy. As a New Testament scholar wrote, "[This] new command is simple enough for a toddler to memorize and appreciate, and it is profound enough that the most mature believers are repeatedly embarrassed at how poorly they comprehend it and put it into practice."

Even more discouraging yet, Jesus says that how we love each other will be how we are recognized as his disciples. Jesus first gives this new "love" commandment in the evangelist John's account of the last supper, and he takes it even another step further by saying, "Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another." (13:34-35) In other words, how well we manifest Christ's love in the world will be the measure by which the Christian community recognized. Jesus does not say that the Christian community will be known by our doctrines or how well we can quote scripture. Jesus does not say we will be known by our certainty of belief, our proper administration of the sacraments, or how beautiful are our stained glass windows and hymnody.

No, we will be known by how our love for one another expresses Christ's love. This is a pretty high bar.

And how does Jesus love? Jesus feeds the hungry, heals the sick and infirm, and gives new life and hope to those who despair. Jesus serves his beloved by washing feet, eating and communing with the outcast, befriending the friendless and caring for those who are unloved. Jesus seeks the lost, one by one, and returns them to his fold. Jesus challenges unfair and unloving political, legal, and religious practices. His is a self-giving love in which he gifts to everyone part of himself. Jesus anoints each and every one of us with his love; no one is outside his reach. And in the end, Jesus shows his love by giving his life. Jesus willingly sacrifices his life into the hands of his enemies in order to show that nothing – *nothing*, not even death – can separate us from the eternal life found in God's love.

That is how we are to love. That is how we are to live. We are disciples of Jesus when we live and love like Jesus. He promises that when we extend this self-sacrificial love to each other, we are united with Christ and abide in him. When we are one in Christ – when we abide in him and he in us; rooting ourselves our very life in Christ's love – we are united with God. It is there that we find Christ's joy abiding in us and our joy to be complete. And that, my friends, is eternal life.

Amen.