

THE ESSENCE AND POWER OF TRUE LOVE

“All you need is love...love...love is all you need!”

I remember listening to these lyrics of a song written by the Beatles which was quite popular in the 1960's. Many other songs, books, poems, stories and movies have been written or made on the subject of love, and new ones are popping up regularly in stores and cinemas. It's truly the sweetest of all emotions! To love and to be loved, isn't this the most wonderful feeling a human being can experience? And we're all yearning for it in different ways. I believe that without love, the world would be a very sad and depressing place to live in.

But what is love? Where does it come from? How can we know what true love really is? Can we define true love based on our human emotions? The dictionary defines love as a deep affection, fondness, tenderness, warmth, intimacy, attachment, endearment and so on... We may experience these kinds of emotions at some point in our life for someone and vice-versa, but is there more to it?

I think that raising my children was my first eye opener on what love really means. I said it many times that being a mother was the desire of my heart since I was a little girl, and the most fulfilling one I've ever had. The love I felt holding my precious babies in my arms was out of this world! I must admit though that as they grew up, they had their moments when they were not as cute and 'lovable'! But my love for them never wavered, and it never will until I take my last breath. I could say these same words for my dear husband whom I love with all my heart. So, where does this deep kind of love come from?

The Bible tells us that true love emanates from the heart of God. People who have experienced God's love in their lives will surely agree with this. However, there are some people who will simply refute this notion, and they come from all levels of society. They like to ridicule and even hate everything that relates to God or simply don't believe that He exists. They just keep going through life doing their own things. And if this means sinning, according to God's standard, they do it without any type of guilt or remorse.

However, despite their unbelief, indifference, defiance or hatred for Him, the scope of God's love for them is absolutely amazing. On a human level, it's hard to comprehend this kind of love. When Jesus hanged on the cross after having been treated unfairly, beaten and mocked, what was His prayer? 'Father, forgive them for they do not know what they are doing.'¹

While Jesus was experiencing the physical, emotional and spiritual agony of the cross, He still expressed the divine nature of God's love; His love for mankind as a whole and even for His enemies. This is truly unfathomable... It is a divine love that can't be compared or equal to any other kind of love I know. And I'm asking myself... Is it possible for me to possess and display that divine love in my life? Is it possible or am I simply aiming too high?

As I pondered over these questions, I headed out the door looking for the Preacher. I had just entered the grounds of the retirement community in my small neighborhood when I saw his red scarf from afar. He was busy cleaning up the beach after yesterday's powerful storm.

"Hi!" I said as I walked toward him avoiding branches, moss and debris that had fallen from the large oak trees that adorn this part of the community.

He glanced over his shoulder and greeted me with a warm smile. "Hi, young lady... it's so nice to see you on this fine morning!"

“Yes, well, I hesitated to go out after the storm we had yesterday, but I had to come and see you... But tell me, why are you cleaning up this mess? Don't they have people here to do that for you?”

“Yes, they do. But I'd like to take my boat out on the lake this afternoon. I know the workers have their hands full with all the clean-up and if I can give them a hand, I'm glad to do it. I'm just clearing a pathway to get my boat out here; that's all I can do anyhow with my arthritis and all...”

“Ok, then I'll let you keep at it... I can always come back another day.” I said a bit disappointed.

He probably noticed my disappointment because he quickly added, “I'm really in no hurry, young lady. Come and let's sit on that bench over there... If I don't get the work done today, there's always tomorrow. And if I can't do it tomorrow, there's always the next day...and the day after that...” he said without showing any disappointment in his voice.

We sat down, then he asked, “Do you know what prayer I say every morning when I wake up?”

“No, I can't say that I do!” I replied, shrugging my shoulders.

“Well, first I thank God to be alive, and for all His blessings. And then, I always ask Him to direct my path throughout the day. To show me the plans He has for me... And I said that same prayer this morning not knowing what this day would bring me...and here you are! So, what I had planned for myself can wait...”

“How do you do this?” I asked, amazed by his comments.

“Do what?”

“To just cancel your own plans to fit into what you say are “God's plans” without being all upset about it.”

“Well, there's only a four-letter word to explain it...L-O-V-E! Love *from* God, my love *for* God and for my 'neighbor', whoever it might be... Someone I know - like you, this morning - or a complete stranger; someone lovable or unlovable; a friend or even an enemy. Actually, it's everyone God puts in our lives and on our path. Love is truly the key ingredient that changes everything!”

He continued. “Remember what Jesus said when asked by a Pharisee what the greatest commandment is? He replied: ‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind,’ and ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’² This is a commandment, and it's not something we do only when we feel like it. So, when we love God with our whole being, we'll also love our 'neighbor' with the same kind of love. I may add as well these words from Jesus, ‘To love our enemies and pray for those who persecute us.’³ That's the kind of love God wants from us.”

“Quite a high standard of love to live by, don't you think? But how can we love God this way?” I asked.

“Well, we can't do it on our own, that's for sure! The reason being that we're born sinners. We either give God no thought at all or are indifferent toward Him. We simply don't love Him the way He wants to be loved. And we need to be forgiven for that. But when we recognize Jesus for who He is - the Son of God coming in the flesh to pay the price for our sins - we are given the power of His Spirit to help us accomplish that. And the more we learn about Him, the more we study the Word of God, then the more we're committed to it. The more we obey it, and the greater our love will be; the greater and the more pure its expression will be.

“Jesus said, ‘For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.’⁴ You know, God isn't looking for people who practice religious rituals; who on the outside can go through the motions, but inside they're just plain hypocrites. God wants more than our believing in Him. Even Satan and his demons believe in

God, but hate Him... We have to come to a point in our love for Him that we trust in His great power and we seek fellowship with Him; we love what He loves and hate what He hates, and we grieve over sin. But most of all, it's manifested in a complete surrender of our lives to Him, and our full obedience to His Word. That's the desire of our hearts even though our obedience is imperfect... It's a continuing development of that reality."

"So, we love God because He first loved us... and then we're able to extend that same kind of love to our 'neighbor' since it flows directly from Him," I commented, trying to make sense of it all. "But I heard many times that to be able to love others, we first have to love ourselves... It's a bit confusing, don't you think?"

"Well, I would say it's total nonsense! It encourages the sin of pride, which God hates... We have to realize that we are born sinners, and no matter how hard we try to love ourselves, we have to admit that deep down we can't... We need a supernatural cleansing, so to speak. And we find it only through Jesus."

"So, what does 'to love your neighbor as you love yourself' involve?" I asked a bit puzzled.

"I'm sure you know the Golden Rule, 'Do to others as you would have them do to you.'⁵ In fact, Jesus said these words. He knew very well how much we like to take care of ourselves. So, whatever sacrifices we make for our own comfort, we should make the same for the comfort of others, without respect to their status in life. It's really a self-sacrificing kind of love for others without asking...what's in it for me? So, we need to ask ourselves... Are we willing to sacrifice the things we enjoy so someone else's needs may be met? Are we willing to give our life for our 'neighbor', if need be? These are tough questions to which we must give honest answers to ourselves and to God," he ended as his voice began to falter.

He remained silent, and I was left speechless. I couldn't deny that his words had touched my heart, and I needed some time alone to sort things out... So, without even saying goodbye, I stood up, looked at him tenderly, and left. He simply watched me walk away...

On my way home I pondered over his question, "Would I be willing to give my life for my 'neighbor', if need be?" Oh, that's a tough one... When such a case is only hypothetical, it's easy for me to answer that I would. But would I bail out when I'm faced with the reality of it? For my children, my husband, someone dear to me, I would do it in a heartbeat because of my deep love for them. But for a 'neighbor', a perfect stranger, could I say the same thing?

I've heard of people losing their lives trying to save someone else's life they didn't even know. Some time ago, a former navy Seal diver died in the attempted rescue of a group of Thai boys trapped in a cave. He ran out of oxygen on his way back to the surface after placing air tanks along the two-mile route to the boys... Tributes have been paid for this man who had the determination to bring these kids home.

It breaks my heart to hear this kind of news of soldiers, firemen, police officers who have made their career protecting our lives and freedom, but when the same is being done by regular citizens, I am truly in awe at the courage and the love they display for their fellowmen. Once, a man sacrificed his life to save a drowning boy. Even though he couldn't swim, he didn't hesitate to jump into a raging river to save this five year old boy. He rescued the boy, but he died in the process. His sacrifice will certainly be remembered, especially by this boy's family...

I was lost in thought when I saw my neighbor from across the street retrieving her mail from their mailbox. We greeted each other, and I moved along as I usually do. But this time she walked toward me and started chatting a bit more. As it happened, we stood there, at the end of my driveway, for a good fifteen minutes first making small talk, but then she opened up to me as if we were best friends. She did most of the talking and I mostly listened... As we were ready to part, she said, "I'm so sorry for having bothered you with my problems like this... But to tell you the truth, I feel much better already!" I said, "Well, I'm

glad I could help... We all have our moments, you know..." We smiled at each other, walked away and entered our home.

I poured myself a glass of water and sat down in my favorite chair thinking of what had just happened. I realized that this woman is not only my neighbor - literally speaking -, but she's also the 'neighbor' Jesus talked about in the parable of the Good Samaritan⁶. Oh, she may not have been the traveler in this story who was stripped of his clothes, beaten, and left half dead alongside the road, but she had a need this morning. This woman needed a listening ear, and I was there to give it to her. It was definitely not in my plans, but God saw it otherwise.

If we really stop and look around us, there are many people that have genuine needs. And if we're put on their path and have the means to fulfill them, God commands us to do it. It might require to put our own needs aside, to invest our time and money, to give a helping hand, to tend a listening ear or even to forgive our enemy, to pray for those that mistreat us. Jesus said, 'Then your reward will be great, and you will be children of the Most High, because He is kind to the ungrateful and wicked. Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful.'⁷ These are very powerful words from the One who willingly gave His life for us all who are 'unlovable'...

I will admit that I don't always display God's love for my 'neighbor' the way I should. My self gets in the way more often than not... But I know one thing; God still loves me because I am His child. And I'm confident that He will carry on the good work He started in me until He calls me home.

Oh, I could go on and on with this subject of love, but I will end here with this quote I read recently that rings true to me.

"If we have got the true love of God shed abroad in our hearts, we will show it in our lives. We will not have to go up and down the earth proclaiming it. We will show it in everything we say or do." Dwight L. Moody, evangelist - 1837-1899

¹Luke 23:34 ²Matthew 22:37-39 ³Matthew 5:44 ⁴Matthew 6:21 ⁵Luke 6:31 ⁶Luke 10:30-35 ⁷Luke 6:35b-36