

4. A Loving Heart

The importance of loving is apparent to anyone familiar with the life and the words of Jesus. It is enough to recall the commandment which he gave his disciples at the last supper: 'Love one another as I have loved you'(John 15:12). The 'as I have loved you' is at the heart of this commandment, for the love which Jesus gave was the love which his Father gave him to give. It was the love of an obedient heart. It was love that flowered from grace. How could we have a genuine prayer life without being moved to do Jesus' will by carrying on his mission of love? If we are not so committed our prayer cannot be real.

As noted in Chapter Two, this is the first of the virtues insisted upon by Saint Teresa for anyone who wants to live a life of genuine prayer. She tells her Sisters:

Deeds are what the Lord wants. He desires that if you see a Sister who is sick to whom you can bring some relief, you have compassion on her and not worry about losing devotion; and that if she is suffering pain, you also feel it ... This is true union with God's will (*Interior Castle* V.3.11).

John of the Cross asserts that 'at the evening of life, you will be examined in love'(Sayings of light and love 57): a love for God which 'does not disdain or exclude anything human'(Dark Night II.11.4). The necessity of such love is also borne out by Jesus' description of the last judgment in which the ones who enjoy God's blessing are those who have cared for the hungry and the oppressed (see Matthew 25:35).

Soul-friendship

Perhaps not as obvious in the life of a person committed to a life of prayer is the importance of soul-friendship. Teresa had a special genius for the kind of friendship which flowed from her communion with God and which engaged the spirit of those who shared in this special love. To one of her Sisters she wrote:

I assure you that if you love me dearly I return your love and I like you to tell me of yours. How unmistakable a trait of our nature is this wish for our love to be returned! It cannot be wrong, for our Lord wishes it too (*Letter to M. Maria de San José*).

She recognised that we need help and companionship on the journey, especially in the early stages of prayer when we can be plagued by distractions and feelings of dryness:

It is a dreadful thing to be beset by so many dangers and to be alone ... For this reason I would advise those who practise prayer, especially at first, to cultivate the friendship and company of others of similar interest ... Since people find comfort in the conversation and human sympathy of ordinary friendships even when these are not of the best kind, I do not know why those who are beginning to love and serve God in earnest should not be allowed to discuss their joys and trials with others – and people who practise prayer have plenty of both (*Life* 7.20).

Therese of Lisieux copied out the following words from John of the Cross and kept them in her missal.

The more you remember your friend, the more you remember the love of God and the greater your desire to love him (*Dark Night* I.4.7).

We are not meant to journey to God on our own. God is communion and offers us companions for our soul. We are created in the image of God who is love, and so our very existence is an expression of love. Created by love and for love, we are meant to dwell in love. We are never meant to be alone.

What does it mean to love another?

We can hardly speak of love when we see another person always in relation to ourselves, either as an extension of ourselves or as someone who can satisfy our needs. To love others we must learn to respect them precisely as other, with their own special and sacred mystery. We must learn to respect others in their own world and not simply insofar as

they relate to us. We are to be open especially to the mysterious ways in which the other person is loved by God. To love another person our heart must learn to resonate in sympathy with the movements of the other person's heart. We cannot love as Jesus loves unless we recognize that there is a sacred mystery unfolding in our own soul and in the soul of the other person. To love is to go beyond this recognition and to be in communion with the other within this sacred mystery. This is true of all love. It is especially true of the love that we know as friendship.

Falling in love

Hence the warning not to confuse love with the experience of falling in love. When we fall in love we experience a partial and temporary collapse of the ego boundaries that we have developed in order to become our own person. We enjoy the feeling of falling in love because it enables us to recapture something of the limitless communion that we knew as children. Of its nature, falling in love cannot last, for true love requires an acceptance of each person's unique otherness. It can, however, lead to true love, for it attracts us to extend our ego boundaries by taking another person into communion. Lasting communion in love is not something we fall into, nor does it always come easily. It is the fruit of much real loving.

Dependency

It is important also to distinguish between love and dependency. We can be tempted, in the name of love, to constrict others in such a way as to reinforce their dependence upon us. We can be tempted also, in the name of love, to try to avoid having to grow up, by depending on others in inappropriate ways. In the name of love we can be mutually reinforcing an unliberating relationship where everything is done to secure what the other person will do for me, rather than developing real love in which we dare the journey of maturing as people and offer ourselves to each other in a mutually liberating self-offering. To love another person I must be true to who I am and to who the other person is, for only the truth will set us free. Within that context we must want that other person's growth and we must seek to avoid anything, however attractive and desirable, which is an obstacle to that growth. It is to share in the desire of Jesus who said: 'I have come that you may live, and live to the full'(John 10:10).

Self-knowledge and love of oneself

We need to be able to turn our attention away from ourselves and from our own needs, and direct our attention to others. We can do this only to the extent that we have a healthy self-respect and love of ourselves. Did not Jesus say that we are to love our neighbour as we love ourselves (Mark 12:31)? To the extent that we do not respect or love ourselves, we necessarily experience disturbance, and a pool that is disturbed cannot reflect clearly. Only to the extent that we have learned to love ourselves as God loves us can we calmly turn our attention away from our own needs and look at the other as other.

Inside each of us is a child who has been hurt and who needs nurturing. To love ourselves we have to learn to love the child within with the same mercy and compassion that God has for us. It is not accidental that when the Hebrew Scriptures speak of God's compassion, they frequently use a word that is used of a mother loving the child in her womb. God longs only that we live and that we are in communion with God in love. If our love for ourselves is to be real, we must love ourselves as we really are. There is a lot to consider here, including our owning of the sinful ways in which we have failed to be the person whom God has graced us to be. Before focusing on our real or apparent

failures, however, we must realise that the most profound truth about ourselves is that we are creatures of God, and that life is something that we receive moment by moment as a gift. We cannot give ourselves life. If our love for ourselves is to be real, we will have to learn to resist the desires and aspirations that obstruct grace and so distort who we are. It is even more important to recognise and nurture those desires and aspirations that respond to grace. The person we become depends on our openness to the creative grace coming to us from the Heart of God.

We can be helped to love ourselves by the love that we receive from others. For this love to be real, however, it is essential that those who love us know us as we really are, for otherwise we know that they are loving only the person they want to see in us, or the mask which we are presenting to them. When that happens we know that what we are being offered, however well intentioned, is not genuine love. In any case, unless others have their own reasons for living in a world of make-believe, they soon see through our masks. We have to learn to resist the temptation to want to make ourselves appear attractive so as to be admired, liked and wanted. It is not how we appear that ultimately matters; it is who we are.

It is impossible to over-estimate the gift given us by those who love us as we actually are. Coming to genuine self-knowledge can be a painful journey, for we must discover our real limitations. When we experience someone loving us as we are, we are encouraged to continue the journey of self-knowledge, however painful, for we know that if and when we find who we really are we will discover something truly beautiful, truly lovable. This is an assurance we need if we are not to give up on discovering our real selves and opt for a self that we are comfortable in presenting. Of course, this option can never succeed in anything beyond playing games. If receiving true love is so vital for our self-knowledge and self-love, it is obvious that giving true love is as vital for others if they are to come to know and love their real selves.

Learning to love in an unconditional way

If we are going to find our true selves and experience and enjoy true loving, we have to climb out of the cradle where we see everything in terms of gratifying our own perceived needs. Such behaviour is selfish, for we are opting to maintain our present level of 'security' and indulge our felt needs rather than risk the giving of the true self and the receiving of another when love beckons us to do so. We need to become aware of the ways in which we do things, motivated by our desire for a return. Friendship cannot work without giving and receiving, nor can a partnership in committed love. If, however, we are to mature beyond the total self-focus of a baby and grow to be able to love in a generative and nurturing way, we have to learn to remain loving even when no return is offered. The journey of learning to love will take up all our lives. It is important that the goal be clear. It is also important to know that we can love only here and now, and that our loving is necessarily something that we do imperfectly, for we are not perfect – not yet! The widow in the Gospel gave more than anyone because she gave all she had, and only what she had.

God, who is love, is gracing us in and through every experience to learn to share the divine love that is unconditional. Such a love is the fruit of grace. We cannot make it happen, but we can honestly admit the limits of our loving and we can long that our 'hidden self may become strong'(Ephesians 3:16), and that gradually we may learn to respond to God's grace which is drawing us towards love because it is drawing us towards God.

‘Doing the truth in love’(Ephesians 4:15)

True love for others will always be a gift of the real self to another, not a destroying of the self. Sometimes in the name of being ‘self-sacrificing’ we are really indulging our false self by trying to keep up an image. This happens when, for example, we fail to confront because we want to maintain the image of being an ‘understanding’ or ‘compassionate’ person. Another example is when we indulge another person without regard to the truth or to the other person’s genuine spiritual good. Such indulging is destructive, for we are, often unwittingly, reinforcing the other person’s dependence on us so as to indulge our own need to be needed. We think we are being loving, but it is the feeling of being loving that we are seeking, and not the genuine good of the other person. Paul gives us the key here when he tells us to ‘do the truth in love’(Ephesians 4:15). Since God is love nothing is true unless it is loving. But since God is truth, nothing is loving if it is not true. Jesus said that the ‘truth will set you free’(John 8:32). If we are not genuinely searching for the truth, we can easily deceive ourselves into thinking that something is loving when it is really a soft way of avoiding the truth.

Love is self-replenishing

Genuine love is self-replenishing. Indeed, it fills and enlarges the person who loves. It does not deplete and diminish. It takes us to deeper levels of self-transcendence. This is especially true of the precious gift that we call friendship. If our feelings are deeply engaged over things that are of little importance, or if our so-called friendship excludes others and leads us to cut them out of ordinary respect and love, we are not dealing with a graced friendship. If, however, the experience of mutual love draws us out to others and into a deeper prayer, these are signs that the friendship is indeed of the Spirit. Another indication is if we truly want the other person to draw closer to God, even if that means that we lose their companionship. A number of Jesus’ first followers were disciples of John the Baptist. Yet when Jesus came near, John was happy to watch his friends leave him and join Jesus (John 3:29):

He who has the bride is the bridegroom. The friend of the bridegroom, who stands and hears him, rejoices greatly at the bridegroom's voice. For this reason my joy has been fulfilled.

Our commitment to prayer is a commitment to an inner journey towards the God of love who dwells in our heart, towards ever deeper communion with God who made us in God’s likeness and for whom our hearts long. This same God is at the heart of everything that exists. In drawing us to divine communion, God is drawing us to the heart of all that God has made. We are never meant to journey alone, not even a person called to the solitary life of a hermit. We are called to be part of the Body of Christ, the communion of saints. Let us be open in love to all those whom providence has given us as companions, and may our sharing of the Spirit enrich us all as together we draw nearer to the source of all life and all love.

Jesus and Peter

Immediately after telling his disciples that they were to love one another with his love, Jesus calls them ‘friends’(John 15:15). We can learn something about the importance of friendship from the following encounter between Jesus and Peter in which Jesus speaks about faithful commitment, but in the end accepts Peter’s friendship as a basis for trust. The impetuous Peter declared: ‘Even though all become deserters, I will not’(Mark 14:29). When the time came, however, his courage failed and he denied Jesus, not once, not twice, but persistently. This is the meaning of ‘three times’.

John has this beautiful scene by the lakeside (John 21:15-17). Alluding to Peter's boast, the risen Jesus says to him: ‘Simon son of John, do you love me *more than these*?’ The word he uses for love [Greek: *agapa*□] means: ‘Are you committed to me? Will you be faithful to the covenant love we have?’ Peter has learned how fickle he can be. He knows,

too, that he is no better than the others. He leaves out any comparison and responds: ‘Lord, you know that I love you’. However, for love he does not use *agapa*□, but rather *phile*□. He makes no claim to being faithful, for he knows he can fail. Rather, he assures Jesus that he is his friend, that he feels for him and cares about him, that his heart is deeply attached to him, that he is fond of him. Jesus’ response is immediate: ‘Feed my lambs’. He is commissioning Peter his friend to go and share love with those who are hungry for it.

Jesus goes on to repeat his opening question, though now he drops out all reference to the others: ‘Simon son of John, do you love me [*agapa*□]?’ He is asking Peter again about his commitment. Once again Peter cannot say yes. He knows his weakness. He can, however, reaffirm his friendship [*phile*□]. And, once again, Jesus says: ‘Tend my sheep’. Jesus’ third question is different. He no longer speaks of commitment and fidelity. Rather he takes Peter’s own word for love [*phile*□] and asks Peter if he really is his friend. Peter’s hurt is a healing one. Jesus is allowing him to make up for the three-fold denial. With a humble, repentant spirit, he declares: ‘Lord, you know everything. You know that I love you [*phile*□]’. This is enough for Jesus who, for a third time, commissions Peter to share this love, this friendship with others. If our love comes from our heart and if we genuinely care for the one we love, we will, thanks to God’s grace, learn to be faithful, as did Peter.

1Corinthians 13:4-8

As a way of reflecting on love let us turn to Paul’s hymn to love. Paul is reflecting on his being loved by the Risen Jesus. He begins by focusing on the way God loves, and so the way we love when we are sharing God’s gift of love with others.

**⁴Love never stops caring;
love acts always in a kind way;**

In this verse and throughout the whole of this passage, Paul uses verbs, and in the present tense. He is not listing various qualities that pertain to love. In true Semitic style he is telling us what love *does*.

‘Love never stops caring’ (Greek: *makrothume*□). This is listed by Paul among the fruits of the Spirit (see Galatians 5:22). The focus is on our sharing in God’s magnanimous love by persevering in doing good and not allowing ourselves to be put off by opposition or suffering. It is often translated ‘slow to anger’. This is a negative way of rendering something which is very positive. ‘Long-suffering’ is better. It features as a description of God in the creedal statement found in Exodus 34:6 and repeated throughout the Hebrew Scriptures. It is a sharing in the passionate and persistent caring of God that is revealed most persuasively in Jesus ‘loving me and giving himself for me’ (Galatians 2:20).

‘Love acts always in a kind way’. This is also listed by Paul as a fruit of the Spirit (Galatians 5:22). Whatever gifts of grace we may or may not have been given by the Spirit, the more excellent way is the way of love which can be recognised by the kindness with which we treat others. Paul exhorts his readers: ‘Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you’ (Ephesians 4:32). Through the gift of love we share in the kindness of God (see Romans 2:4). God is frequently spoken of as ‘kind’ particularly in the psalms (for example Psalm 25:8). It is this same picture of God which is given us by Jesus, notably in his description of the way in which the father welcomed home his wayward son: ‘While he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him’ (Luke 15:20). It is this same compassionate and persistent love that Jesus himself manifested in the way he lived

and in the way he died. It is a gift to us from the heart of Jesus pierced on the cross (John 19:34). This is the gift of the Spirit, the fountain of living water which flows from Jesus' breast (John 7:38).

Having described love in terms characteristic of the love of God revealed in Jesus, Paul goes on to say what love is not. Again he uses verbs, because he wants to point to what love does not *do*.

^{4b}Love does not act out of jealousy or envy;

it does not boast; or behave arrogantly;

⁵it does not behave indecently or insist on its own way.

Love does not give way to irritation or brood over wrongs;

⁶It takes no pleasure in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth.

Paul returns to a positive description of love. Love is about having space in one's heart, space for people, space to hold problems, disappointments and pain, as well as joys, hopes and dreams.

⁷Love has space enough to hold and to bear everything and everyone.

It believes all things, hopes all things, and endures whatever comes.

⁸Love does not come to an end.

Love 'believes all things'. Paul often speaks of the close union of love and faith. To believe is to be open to God's self-revelation, to accept what we come to know when we listen to God, and to act accordingly. God knows every one with the knowledge of one who loves. In other words, God continually believes in us and in our possibilities for good. God respects our freedom, but passionately cares about what we do, and persists in drawing us to God and to others through our life experiences. To this end God offers us the possibility of repentance when we fail, and believes in our capacity to be converted and to live. Believing and loving are inseparable.

Love 'hopes all things'. One who loves is attentive to present communion with the one loved. But the present moment is not static or isolated; rather, it points to and opens up a future communion for which we long, and to which we are called. Our present union encourages us to leave the future confidently in the hands of God in whom we have placed our trust.

Love 'endures all things'. Paul is speaking of the ability to remain faithful to love in the midst of opposition. The supreme example of this is Jesus on the cross.

We cannot expect to pray unless we are also committed to be God's instrument in carrying on the love of Jesus in our world, and we should open our hearts to the gift of friendship in which we share our journey of prayer with those with whom our soul can be at home.