

The Dark Side of Love

When I was younger, I was pretty confident that I knew what love meant. After all, we all experience love in some way, being in love, loving someone, being loved by someone. Virtually everyone has known the love of somebody, a friend, a family member, an acquaintance.

But the older I get the more I wonder sometimes whether I have truly grasped what that over-used word, love, really means?

The reason I say this, is because of the dark side of love.

Too common are these experiences: We fall in love and think it will last forever, but then fall out of love, feel love go sour, feel love grow cold, see love betrayed, feel ourselves wounded by love, and wound others. Finally, even more upsetting, we all find that there are always people in our lives who are cold, bitter, and unforgiving towards us so that it is not always easy to feel love and be loving.

In the light of this reticence, I would like comment on Jesus' most important commandment: "Love one another as I have loved you!"

We too easily read that simplistically, romantically, and in a one-sided, over-confident manner. But this command contains the most important challenge of the whole gospel and, like the deepest part of the gospel to which it is linked, the crucifixion, it is very, very difficult to imitate. Why?

It's easy to consider ourselves as loving if we only look at one side of things, namely, how we relate to those people who are loving, warm, respectful, and gracious towards us. If we rate ourselves on how we feel about ourselves in our best moments among like-minded friends, we can easily conclude both that we are loving persons and that we are measuring up to Jesus' command to love as he did.

But if we begin to look at the skeletons in our relational closets our naive confidence soon disappears: What about the people who hate us, whom we don't like? What about the people whom we avoid and who avoid us? What about those people towards whom we feel resentment? What about all those people with whom we are at odds, towards whom we feel suspicion, coldness, anger? What about those people whom we haven't been able to forgive?

It's one thing to love someone who adores you, it's quite another to love someone who wants to make your life a misery!

But that's the real test. Jesus' command to love contains a critical subordinate clause, "as I have loved you!"

Where Jesus stretches us beyond our natural instincts and beyond all self-delusion is in his command to love our enemies, to be warm to those who are cold to us, to be kind to those who are cruel to us, to do good to those who hate us, to forgive those who hurt us, to forgive those who won't forgive us, and to ultimately love and forgive those who are trying to ruin us.

This story is often told by the Dalai Lama about a Tibetan monk who had been tortured in a Chinese prison for 22 years. When he reached Dharamsala, the Dalai Lama asked him: "What were you afraid of the most in prison?" He replied: "I was afraid that I might lose my compassion towards the torturers."

What shatters our illusion of love is the presence in our lives of people who hate us. They're the test. This is the dark side of love and it's here where we have to measure up:

God help us, and help us grow in faith and hope and love!

Tim