

A Demonstrative Love for God

It doesn't take a whole lot of savvy to recognize that our popular culture is preoccupied with LOVE. Human relationships are infinitely fascinating to us, especially those relationships which are motivated by attraction, sexuality, and the answer to loneliness. Romance is featured in movies, books, and on stage. And then there is popular music.

I remember a sixth grade music class. The teacher asked us something like, "What do people like to sing about in popular songs?" We all sat there knowing the most obvious answer, LOVE, but we were too embarrassed to say it aloud. We gave dumb answers until finally someone dared to name the topic we were all thinking about all the time.

LOVE. We use the word all the time. I love ice cream. I love the mountains. I love to go camping. I love your shirt. Some people are confident saying "I love you" to many people; some are careless tossing that phrase around; some reserve it for only the most cherished relationships; and some are frightened by its strong implications. LOVE has many dimensions and levels to it. There's the Valentine's Day understanding, with all its commercial offspring, but there's also a profound religious understanding.

Christian faith teaches us about the LOVE at the center of everything. I have heard it said that this is our #1 contribution to the world community. Other religions emphasize other truths. But our faith begins with understanding that the One who created us, redeemed us, and sustains us is LOVE, that God loves us, God desires and commands our love, and God's love flows through us to all the world. God is love, God loves, we love God, and we love others. That is the heart of the Christian message. Everything else is derivative.

It's our intention to spend the next nine months going deeper into this message. There is an abundance of scripture to explore, there are many hymns and songs to sing, and there are countless ways to take this message into the world in our living. What are we doing here? We are learning and living God's love, together.

There is a prevalent misconception about the Bible that I want to dispute from the start. You may have heard, or you may even believe, that the Old Testament depicts a God of wrath, and the New Testament depicts a God of love. That idea is simplistic and inaccurate, and is one of the roots of anti-Judaism and anti-Semitism. Let's erase it from our minds and read the whole Bible without that prejudice. The love of God to which the New Testament gives amazing testimony is rooted in the love of God which underlies the Old Testament witness.

And if we need a core scripture to remind us of that, here it is. The *Shema*, Deuteronomy 6:4-9, called *Shema* because that is the Hebrew word with which it begins, "Hear." "*Sh'ma Yisra'eil Adonai Eloheinu Adonai echad.*" "Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is One." It is the oldest daily prayer in Judaism, recited morning and night, reminding those who say it who God is to them. God initiated this relationship, this covenant. God reached out and claimed and saved the Hebrew people, who once were slaves in Egypt. God is One, undivided, and God's claim is for love, for holiness, for the blessing of the world.

Imagine repeating this to oneself every morning upon rising, and every evening before sleep. We have so many voices clamoring for our attention, so many messages calling to us, so many distractions from a focused, faithful life. Imagine focusing on God twice a day, how that could drive our lives to stay on the right track, live the life God shows us is good, and be the persons God made us to be. Imagine.

But that's not all. The scripture doesn't stop there. God's grace commands a response. "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your soul, and all your might." The "heart" in Hebrew thought is not as much a place of emotion as it is of thinking, perceiving, and intention. The word translated "soul" means "being" or "self," that spark of life which makes us each unique. And "might" means capacity, strength, wealth, and property. Taken all together, mind, soul, and strength constitute the whole self, total commitment. One scholar paraphrases, "Love the Lord your God wholeheartedly, with your whole self, with all your capacity. The oneness of the Lord your God is matched by the oneness and totality of your devotion." (Patrick D. Miller, *Deuteronomy*, 1990, John Knox Press, Louisville, p. 103)

Imagine total devotion to God. We would not be chasing every whim or fancy that occurs to us, we could ignore all the things advertisers tempt us with, and we would not waste our time pursuing false or even dangerous dreams. We'd praise God with our every action, we'd show our allegiance every moment of every day, we'd give all we have to the needs of the world which God loves. We'd be as undivided as God, unified in our purpose and our living. Total devotion. Imagine.

But the most interesting word here is LOVE. It's an action word, a covenant word, a word which means loyalty and trust. The Hebrew word *'ahav*, translated LOVE, is not a feeling or emotion—those can't be commanded. What can be commanded is our behavior, how we are to show our commitment to God. The word implies a public display, a demonstration, action. And the demonstration is illustrated by the details: recite these words to your children, talk about them at home and away, from morning until nighttime. Wear them on your body, and display them on your doorway and gates. Everywhere, always, love the Lord your God with everything, every way possible. Don't make these mere words, live them. Don't keep them to yourself, share them. Don't call this relationship with God private, be public about it, and what you say publicly, live at home, too. The Lord is One, undivided, only—our life and its commitments ought to be one also.

Imagine living in complete obedience to this command. Our children would know to whom they belong, and would pass this knowledge to their children, and their children's children. Our neighbors and acquaintances would see our love for God, and receive God's love flowing outward from us, for it would be embodied. Our moral and ethical choices would always have God's imprint on them. And since we would love God, we would love God's ways and worship God with our very lives. Imagine.

Love the Lord your God with everything you've got, with all that you are, with all that you ever want to be. When God gives us this command, God is giving us the grace of a true life, a meaningful life, a fulfilled and free life. The Law is grace, for it is given out of love. The Law is LOVE.

We show our love for God in our worship. And that's not something we need to imagine, that's something we can do right here and now. Worship God with all that we are, not holding back. Sing with gusto, no matter how musical we think we are, just sing. Pray with confidence that God is listening, pray the truest, deepest longings of our hearts, pray with devotion and passion. Listen to God's Word, awake and alert to how it will speak into our lives and give us truth to follow. Each week, be grateful that we can gather as community to seek God, praise God, adore God, know God—don't take it for granted.

Honor God with your worship in the congregation. It's not a performance for you, it's your performance for God.

And it's also a rehearsal for the remaining 167 hours of the week. In those 167 hours, we are sent out to love the Lord with all our heart, soul, and strength. We are sent with the assurance that God has chosen, claimed, and saved us—Christ has set his mark on us—the Holy Spirit is with us. We are to wear the signs of our devotion on our bodies. That means in our actions, and in our relationships. We are to teach our children—and in the church, they belong to all of us, not just to their parents. All of us teach our children of God's love for them that they can return in love for God. We are to love God day and night, at home and at work and when we travel. We are God's people, God is our Lord, and that should permeate everything we do and say and are. Have passion for God, for God has passion for us. Love God with all that you are.

There is a straight line from Deuteronomy to Jesus, and from Jesus to the teachings of the early church. When Jesus was asked "Which commandment is the greatest?" he never hesitated, he just quoted what all Jews knew. Love the Lord your God with everything you've got. And he added the law from Leviticus 19:8 which summarizes our relationship to other people: Love your neighbor as yourself. These are God's commandments, simple yet total. The writer of 1 John reiterated: "The love of God is this, that we obey his commandments. And his commandments are not burdensome." (1 Jn 5:3)

Hear, O Church, the Lord our God, the Lord is Love!

Praise be to God for God's great love, for God's good commandments, and for the power to live them in the world!