

Love.

[Matthew 1:18-25](#)

Love. It's the reason for the season. It's the center of the Christian narrative. Not sin nor guilt nor judgement but incredible love. Creation has been described as the pillow-talk of the Trinity. We were conceived in love and created in love and we are nourished in love.

Here are some of our central understandings:

“For God so loved the world that he sent his only begotten-son that all who believe in him might not perish but have everlasting life” John 3:16

You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength. This is the first commandment. And the second, like it, is this: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. There is no commandment greater than these. Mark 12:30-31

I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. 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.’ John 13: 34,35

Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one's life for one's friends. John 15:13

But the difficulty with love is that it is a slippery concept. It means different things to different people at different times in their lives. And there are different ways that we love and different ways that we express our love.

As a young person I was attracted to people who seemed to have something I wanted or needed. I called this love. And yes it was a kind of love but it was love at a very immature stage. It was based not in the confidence of self-love but in the desperate search for someone who would make me feel whole.

When my niece got married for the first time she was very excited about the wedding. She was giggly silly about being married. So much so that she couldn't see that she was marrying a controlling, distant young man who at that time was not capable of real intimacy. She believed she was in love.

*(all you need is love)*

I think it's like the notes on a piano. Ann, could you play a low C... and now a high C?

Those notes are both C but they sound at very different frequencies.

We can think of love like this. God's love is at a very high frequency. It is at the truest and highest frequency. This is the love that is constantly creating the universe. This is the love that makes the rose a rose and makes us us. This is Love with a capital L.

The immature love which searches for completion in another person and then clings, unable to allow that person to be a separate independent being, that is like a low C. It is a low vibration but there is still love there.

When Jesus calls us to love, I don't think he is imagining that we have no ability to love, but he is calling us to love in a different way, more like God's way. He is calling us to raise the vibration of our love. So let's think about God's love and how we might aspire to love.

God's love is unconditional. God continues to love us regardless of how we behave. The Biblical testimony is that God can get pretty annoyed when we fail to live up to our potential but God's love is always available to us. Think of the Prodigal Son. He behaves outrageously. I imagine that Jesus' audience would have been squirming with embarrassment or even outrage when they heard about this young man who demanded his inheritance and then went off and squandered it. But when he decided to come back, his father welcomed him home with open arms. God always calls after us but never forces us, and then, when we come to our senses and return, welcomes us back home.

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There's a similar vibe in today's Gospel reading. The currency of the day was honor. People then were not concerned about how wealthy everyone was but how much honor each family had. Those with greatest honor were the most influential, the people everyone wanted to know and be friends with. To bring dishonor to your family was a disastrous thing. Joseph is about to marry Mary. But then he discovers that she is pregnant by someone else. He must have been devastated. Talk about dishonor. Mary had brought dishonor to her family by getting pregnant before being married. No way did Joseph want to bring that dishonor into his family, or to be personally associated with it. But being a kind man, he decided not to make a big public denouncement of Mary but just to let her know quietly that this was a deal breaker.

Then he had a dream which changed everything. In Luke's account of the birth of Christ, angels tend to appear with radical information, but in Matthew God speaks through dreams. So Joseph had a dream. In this dream he was told that rather than Mary being dishonored by this pregnancy, she was greatly honored by God. And so Joseph went ahead with the wedding and she became his wife.

I think this must have taken a mature love. Instead of the virginal bride of his dreams, Joseph's love for Mary and his trust in God enabled him to make an almost unimaginable move; he married a pregnant girl. Now my mother told me that if you got pregnant before the wedding you had to wear a red suit down the aisle instead of a white wedding dress. Did any of your mothers

tell you that? I'm pretty sure that Joseph did not demand that Mary wore a red suit but allowed her to dress like any other bride.

Because Joseph was able to love her exactly as she was, without punishing her for potentially bringing great dishonor to him and his family because, even without the red suit, word might still get out that she was pregnant. Joseph let her be exactly who she was and who God was calling her to be. The father of the Prodigal Son allowed him to be exactly who he was, perhaps stupid and pig-headed, but none the less beloved.

*(all you need is love)*

God's love for us is like that. God sees us as we are and sees the very best in us. God does not look on us as dishonored by our mistakes and our resentments. God looks on us and sees in us his child. He sees us as whole, as the people we are becoming – fully Christ-like beings, filled with God's light and love and joy.

The spiritual teacher, Marianne Williamson, tells of a time when she saw a man she didn't like and was busy thinking about all the things that were wrong with him when she heard God say "Funny, I kinda like him."

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So this is how we are to love. We are to love with generous open hearts not keeping each other trapped in our worst moments but forgiving and moving on. We are to see one another as our best selves, as healed and free from all our annoying habits and ego-attachments. We are to want the very best for one another, even when that conflicts with our own desires, even when your flourishing leads you to want things that make me sad. I don't want Bishop Mary to leave the diocese. I don't want Deacon Sharon to leave the parish. But loving them means supporting their flourishing even though that means loss and change for me. But ultimately it is not a loss because we are all one in Christ and so your flourishing supports mine. We are all blessed when one in the Body flourishes – we all become healthier.

*(all you need is love)*

We are to love one another into becoming Christ-like, into becoming the people God created us to be. That is the kind of love that will show that we are Jesus' disciples.

Because it is the way that God loves us.

Altogether now... *"All you need is love..."*