

LOVE HELPS US SEE DEEPER

(02/11/19)

Scripture Lessons: 1 Corinthians 13:1-13
1 John 4:7-12, 16-21
Mark 12:28-34

“Those who say, ‘I love God,’ and hate their brothers and sisters, are liars; for those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen. The commandment we have from him is this: those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also.” (1 John 4:20-21)

As we approach Valentine’s Day, which we celebrate this coming Thursday, I find myself thinking back approximately twenty years to a time when we as a church held our annual meetings on the second Saturday night in February instead of the second Sunday following our worship service, as we will do today. On that particular year, whenever it was, the second Saturday in February happened to coincide with Valentine’s Day.

Most of us men regarded the confluence of dates as a gift from heaven! We could take our wives out to a delicious pot-luck dinner served by Women’s Fellowship, which we thought should technically count as “taking your wife out to dinner on Valentine’s Day,” and also attend our church’s annual meeting, which is our responsibility as church members. It apparently never occurred to us that a meal prepared by the Women’s Fellowship meant that our wives and all the other women in the church were preparing both their meal and ours, so it wasn’t exactly taking your wife out to dinner. In yet another example of unconscious insensitivity, I recall that one of the men verbalized this confluence of events as “killing two birds with one stone.” I had a funny feeling at the time that his comment fell into the category of an ill-advised statement.

The women of the church, for some reason, took offense at this remark. I guess they had a different concept of romance than we men had! In any event, when confronted with the wrath of our women-folk and the fear that they might adopt the stance taken by the women in Aristophanes’ *Lysistrata* (just kidding!), we rescheduled our church annual meeting. This may be when we changed the date to Sundays after church.

Today, following our worship service and a luncheon hosted by Women’s Fellowship, we will hold our church’s annual meeting. It is a time to reflect back over the year that has passed. As we review the reports of the various boards and committees, we will begin to realize how much we have done over the past year. I believe that when we look at what we have

accomplished in so many areas of our church life, the tone of the meeting should be positive and celebratory. This is not to say that we do not have problems and challenges that lie ahead. We do. But if we meet them together as a community of faith, we will not only resolve them, we will hopefully grow into and grow through them.

Today we are going to think about something that is an integral part of our faith, our spiritual journey, our little church family, and the quality of our daily life. We are going to think about love, which we celebrate each year on Valentine's Day. It is only right and fitting that we should do so. After all, if we celebrate National Pickle Week every May 15-24 (which is, BTW, actually 10 days, not a week), and if we celebrate National Pancake Month every February, we can certainly set aside one day a year, February 14, to celebrate the mysterious healing and reconciling power of love.

We have all heard the saying that "love is blind." To a certain extent this is true. I'm sure we can think of relationships that seem so right to the two people who are head over heels in love but seem so obviously wrong to everyone else. Even though this saying can be true in certain cases, the opposite is also true. Love may be blind, but it also can help us to see more clearly. It can help us to see more deeply.

If you experience love in your life, you see the world differently. This is also true of our religious faith. If you experience the reality of God in your life, you see the world differently. Your experience makes a profound difference in your perception, your beliefs about life, your relationships, your values, and even your meaning in life.

We now know that our old understanding of perception, the belief that visual perceptions are simply stimulations on the retina of the eye, the passive recording of sensory images from the outside world, is simplistic. Several persons may perceive the same object or event quite differently. We move out to the world in our seeing. We structure the reality we experience. We see through our own eyes, through glasses colored by who we are and by the experiences we have had in life.

To a certain extent, perhaps to a great extent, we shape the reality we perceive. To a certain extent, perhaps to a great extent, we create the world in which we live. The way we perceive something has a profound effect on how we respond to it. If this is the case, as it

certainly seems to be, then it might be helpful to reflect on what it would mean to see through the eyes of love.

First, what would it mean to see yourself through the eyes of love?

You may find it difficult to love yourself in a healthy way. Perhaps you were not loved as a child, or perhaps the love your parents felt for you was not communicated to you in a way that registered. You may believe you are not loved for who you are but only for what you do. You may have adopted or internalized such high standards for yourself that you are always falling short. You may focus on your failures and shortcomings while your strengths and gifts actually drift out of your perceptual field.

Jesus leads us to a deeper kind of love when he said we should love our neighbor as ourselves. He did not say we should love our neighbor and hate ourselves. He did not say that everyone is important except us. Some of us seem to feel that God can forgive everyone, accept everyone, and love everyone but us. We need to see ourselves as God sees us, through the eyes of love. This is what happens when love brings us to a deeper understanding and perception of ourselves.

Second, what would it mean to see others through the eyes of love?

William James, the great American educator and psychologist, in his book *Talks to Teachers on Psychology and to Students on Some of Life's Ideals*, describes the difference between eyes that see with love and eyes that do not. James writes:

Every Jack sees in his own particular Jill charms and perfections to the enchantment of which we stolid onlookers are stone-cold. And who has the superior view of the absolute truth, he or we? Who has the more vital insight into the nature of Jill's existence as a fact? Is he in excess, being in this matter a maniac? Or are we in defect, being victims of a pathological anaesthesia as regards Jill's magical importance?

Surely the latter; surely to Jack are the profounder truths revealed; surely Jill's palpitating little life-throbs are among the wonders of creation, are worthy of this sympathetic interest; and it is to our shame that the rest of us cannot feel like Jack. For Jack realizes Jill concretely, and we do not. He struggles toward a union with her inner life, divining her feelings, anticipating her desires, understanding her limits as manfully as he can, and yet inadequately too, for he is afflicted with some blindness even here. Whilst we, dead clods that we are, do not even seek after these things, but are contented that the portion of eternal fact named Jill should be for us as if it were not.

Jill, who knows her inner life, knows that Jack's way of taking it--so importantly--is the true and serious way; and she responds to the truth in him by taking him seriously too. May the ancient blindness never wrap itself about either of them again! Where would any of us be, were there no one willing to know us as we really are or ready to repay us for our insight by making recognizant return? We ought, all of us, to realize each other in this intense, pathetic, and important way. (p. 266)

When we love someone, we see them in a different way. Our perception then shapes our relationship. The apostle Paul tells us that when we love we will find ourselves becoming more patient, more kind. We will be less jealous and possessive. We will be able to give in graciously and not insist on our own way. We will have hope, even in dark times, and we will be able to endure struggles that would destroy those who do not love. This reminds me of a saying that I saw recently on a plaque in an antique store in Lawrence: "Marriage is a relationship between two imperfect people who don't give up on each other."

In our everyday lives, the choice is most often not between love and hate but between love and indifference. Martin Buber, the Jewish theologian, describes this as the difference between an "I-Thou" relationship and an "I-It" relationship.

The detached objectivity of "I-It" relationships has been overvalued in our culture. Men have paid the price for this in their retarded psychological development. Cool, detached objectivity was taught as the "professional" way for physicians, nurses, and psychotherapists to treat those under their care. But cool, detached objectivity does not build relationship, and loving, caring relationship is just as important as technology or technique in the healing process.

The existentialist philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche has said, "Cold gray eyes do not know the value of things." If you don't believe this, try looking at your spouse, your children, your friends, your pastor, or your church with cold gray eyes. See how quickly it will kill the relationship. Try looking at immigrants, at refugees, at the victims of the devastating war in Yemen with cold gray eyes and see if it will move you to respond.

Think what a difference it would make if we viewed our earth as a living organism and all the peoples of the world as our brothers and sisters! Our beliefs shape our perceptions, our perceptions shape our understanding, and our understanding shapes our response. This is why it is important that we view the events of our life and of life itself through the eyes of love.

Finally, what would it mean to see God through the eyes of love?

Jesus tells us that the first and greatest commandment is the commandment to love. He tells us that the ultimate spiritual discipline is to love the Lord our God with all our heart, mind, soul, and strength. Actually, this is all we need to do. As Augustine said in his tremendously simplistic but deeply profound moral code, "Love God and do whatever you like." Augustine knew that if we really love God with all our heart, mind, soul, and strength, only good deeds will flow from us.

The only way we can know each other, truly know each other as each of us deserves and desperately needs to be known, is to love each other as Jack loves Jill. The only way we can know God, can truly know God as an intimate part of our lives, is to love and trust God as Jesus loved and trusted God.

There is something mysterious about this love we celebrate on Valentine's Day. It bridges the gap between two people. It spans the gulf between two worlds. Love transcends and gives rise to knowledge in our relationship with others and in our relationship with God. It helps us to see deeper into everything, into everyone. The more we love someone, the clearer our perception of him/her becomes. The clearer our perception of someone, the better we know him/her. Love is greater than faith and hope, for love unites us with others and with God.

Last week, as a prelude to yet another Super Bowl victory by our New England Patriots, one of the networks took us on a walk down memory lane, bringing back some of the great Super Bowl commercials of the past fifty years. The show brought back a lot of memories. Do you remember the commercial where Mean Joe Green of the Pittsburgh Steelers tosses his jersey to the little boy who has just shared his Pepsi with him? That one still gets me! Compared with some of the great commercials from years past, I found this year's offerings profoundly uncreative. None of them prompted me to race out and purchase the product they were selling.

The commercial from the past that touched me most deeply was an advertisement for an agency that provides services to the handicapped. In it a little boy is staring through the bars of a cage at a little dog. The owner of the dog pound tells the boy that he doesn't want that dog; that dog is partially blind. What he wants is a good dog, a dog that is not handicapped. The little boy doesn't budge. He continues to stare through the bars of the cage at a cute little one-eyed dog that is looking up at him.

The next scene is the little boy happily carrying the partially blind dog out of the pound. The camera slowly pans down to the little boy's legs. One of his legs is artificial, mechanical from the knee down. The little handicapped boy is lovingly carrying home the little handicapped dog. The caption across the screen reads, "We need to develop the ability to see past the disability."

The little boy sees the dog through different eyes from the owner of the pound. He sees deeper because he sees through the eyes of love. He has the ability to see past the disability. If he can do this for the dog, he might also be able to do it for himself. Or perhaps it is the other way around: if he can do this for himself, he will be able to do it for the dog.

We are incarnations of God's creative nature. This means we are part of God and God dwells within us. Jesus tells us that God sees us through the eyes of love. No matter who we are, God loves us. Jesus tells us that God wants us to love one another, and God wants us to love ourselves.

In a time when people seem to have lost their sense of a personal relationship with God, the question, "How can we know God?" becomes important. We know God when we build a relationship that is characterized by loving trust. In a time when so many marriages are struggling or broken, when so many people are hurting or lonely, the question, "How can we know each other?" becomes important. We know each other when we see through the eyes of love.

Sometimes the heart sees what is invisible to the eye. In the week to come, let us make an effort to see God, the life that we have been given, and also ourselves with our heart, to see through the eyes of love. Let us make an effort to see each other in the way that Jack sees Jill, in the way that little handicapped boy sees that little handicapped dog. If we do this, we might be surprised at what we will discover!

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