

Love – The Great Legitim�er

4th Sunday of Ordinary Time – Year C

Jeremiah 1:1-4, 17-19
Psalms 71:1-2, 3-4, 5-6, 15, 17

1 Corinthians 13:4-13
Luke 4:21-30

Perhaps one of the hottest topics in every culture of every time is “love.” It is found in a diversity of contexts from art and literature to cultural institutions such as marriage and family. Just as diverse are the interpretations of the meaning of love that have been expressed throughout the ages.

“Love” has also become the excuse of choice that serves as a great legitim�er for various actions that might otherwise be considered morally atrocious. We see in Shakespeare that suicide is, in fact, romantic and honorable if it is done for “love.” In *Romeo and Juliet*, love is at the center of the story, leading to the suicide of the two title characters. This is the case in many love stories throughout history, as many love stories are tragedies. Adultery and promiscuity is excusable, as long as it’s done for “love.” I recently read an article that told of a woman who was pregnant with triplets. She chose to abort two of them, but kept the third. One of the reasons she cited was that she wanted to concentrate her “love” on one child, rather than spread it out between three. Ironically she was held up as a true example of maternal maturity.

In addition to emotion, the modern cultural interpretation of “love” usually includes a degree of sexual attraction. Since the moral upheaval of the sixties, “love” has been associated with various expressions of sexuality. “Make love, not war” became the mantra of many anti-war demonstrations during this period. In countless movies and novels, love stories simply cannot be told without some explicit expression of sexuality whether it is between adults,

between teenage children, and *especially* unmarried couples.

In the many socio-political debates over sexuality and sexual orientation “love” is often the great legitim�er that makes such acts of promiscuity or adultery justifiable. “What if you love him/her?” is often asked by teenagers when trying to morally justify being sexually active. In the recent debate over same-sex unions, advocates more often than not reduce the issue to a question of “love” and its expression between two people. The debate over gay adoptions includes the argument that the children are being given a home where they are “loved.” Even the movement seeking to legalize a “consensual” relationship between an adult and a child states “love” as the justification.

More often than not “love” is narrowly interpreted on the emotional level. Indeed in our modern cultural mindset “love” is usually understood as an intense emotional bubble of happiness focused on a particular individual or object (“I just love that doggy in the window!”). On occasion, married couples that divorce often state as a reason, “I just don’t love him/her anymore.”

Given all of this, how often do we consider “love” as it is expressed in Holy Scripture? Reflection on this meaning makes the modern notions of “love” all the more ridiculous, and in some cases scandalous.

St. Paul’s first Epistle to the Corinthians, contains arguably one of the most well-known and popular passages of the Bible. The vast majority of weddings one way or another include this passage, or

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portions of it. However, what exactly does it tell us; not only about the reality of “love,” but of “love” as it is intended and expressed by God himself?

“Love” is described as patient, kind, truthful, hopeful and enduring. It is not envious, boastful, arrogant, rude, irritable, resentful or gloating. “Love,” however, is not described as perpetually happy or emotionally ecstatic. It

is not described as the absence of anger, sadness or depression. There is, in fact, no reference to emotion in the entire passage, which is ironic considering the emotional response this passage tends to evoke. “Love,” therefore, in the biblical sense is not emotional or sexual. Rather

“love” is an attitude; an *intellectual* disposition.

“Love” is also one of the most basic commandments Jesus gives us – “Love one another as I have loved you” (Jn 15:12). Here, again, however, love is much more than an emotional temperament, because

Jesus adds another detail to “love” that many of us overlook when quoting His command. Jesus says in the Gospel of John, “as the Father has loved me, so I have loved you. Live on in my love” (Jn 15:9). Then Jesus goes on to say, “you live in my love, *if you do what I command you*” (Jn 15:10). Shortly thereafter, following his “Love one another” command, Jesus states, “there is no

greater love than this, to lay down your life for a

friend” (Jn 15:13). He then goes on to say, “You are my friends, *if you do what I command you*” (Jn 15:14).

“Love,” therefore, is not a matter of emotion or sexuality. It is not a warm fuzzy, nor is it a big bubble of ecstatic happiness. Rather it is an intellectual and attitudinal

disposition that begins and ends with obedience to God’s commandments; essentially, obedience to God.

Fr. William Nicholas
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