

THE THREE PILLARS: PART III

THE REAL DEAL

I Corinthians 13:1-13

Whatever happened to love? I am not talking about the heart skipping love that pumps our hormones to full throttle and makes us feel as if we are walking on air at the sight of our beloved. Afraid we might die of a heart attack, many of us consider ourselves too old to even fantasize about having that experience anymore, but we remember what it was like. It is one of the most compelling of human emotions.

Although an article I read recently made me wonder if the Millennials for whom this is a highly sought after experience are not seeking it a little unorthodoxly. Since the former blind date has been replaced by meeting on the internet, it seems the standard for beginning a sexual relationship has now changed since I was single. Getting to know someone and falling in love first is no longer regarded as a prerequisite for physical intimacy. Apparently, even the more recent rule of thumb of waiting until the third date has become passe. For it is now becoming increasingly popular to arrange on Facebook to have a sexual encounter *before* the first date to see if dating is even worth bothering with. Why waste all that time and money getting to know someone if you are not going to be sexually compatible? Talk about cutting to the chase! I am not sure if I was born too early or too late.

So how can I ask what has happened to love when we so earnestly desire it? But my question has less to do with romance and more to do with the kind of love that is patient and kind, the sort that is neither boastful nor rude, the love that does not insist on its own way, that is neither irritable nor resentful, that never rejoices in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth, the kind of love that bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things and endures all things. What has happened to *that* love?

This is Part III of our Lenten series on which we have focused on the three pillars of the Christian life—faith, hope and love. In Part I, we examined faith and the importance of understanding that because we do not have the luxury of actually seeing God face to face that we must necessarily infer God's presence by what we *can* see—namely the entire, beyond-our-comprehension universe to which we belong.

And then in Part II, we explored faith's twin sister, hope, who cannot exist without faith. Because hope that is seen is not hope at all and therefore requires us to hand over control of our lives to that God we cannot see either, trusting in that God's promises for the future and relying upon Divine guidance to lead us on the path we are meant to walk. And today we shall turn our attention to that path which is undergirded by both faith and hope and represents the third and greatest pillar of the Christian life—love

Jesus told us to love our neighbor as ourselves. It stands to reason that we cannot give someone else something that we ourselves do not possess. I would love to give you the shirt off my back, if only I had a shirt. If I cannot love myself unconditionally, I can certainly not give that love to another.

I think we can all agree this is the case. But it is not so simple for two contrasting reasons. The first is that many of us, including myself, were given either contradictory or negative messages about ourselves while growing up. My mother was always an enthusiastic cheerleader and it is not that we could do no wrong, it is just that she corrected us without bruising our egos. My father, on the other hand, was often hyper-critical and made us feel that we could never be good enough to meet his ideals. Mixed messages will always leave us believing the worse and doubting our self-worth. In that case, we can only conditionally love ourselves, based upon our achievements, seeking a perfection we can never attain.

The second complicating reason is the opposite of the first. And that is self-absorption. It is my observation that the social media revolution we are experiencing encourages just that. "Me-ness" is running amuck in our society. We boast about how many friends we have on

Facebook, we record our likes and dislikes (and who gives a hoot anyway?) as if they are a referendum on our personal worth, we see how many retweets we can get and take endless pictures of ourselves to document our personal journeys to the entire world.

While that sort of narcissistic approach to life may appear to be unconditional love for the self, it is actually not so. Because what has really happened is that we grow far too dependent upon people's reactions to us and begin to create an identity for ourselves that is not real because it is based upon what our so-called "friends" expect of us. What we then need is continuous adulation and approval which we can never get enough of. It is a spiritual desert.

Author Don Miguel Ruiz explains it this way: *Unconditional love is completely different than conditional love; it is a state of equilibrium between gratitude and generosity.*

Unconditional love is real love; when you live in that love, you live in inner peace. By feeling that love, you feel joyful and optimistic; you enjoy life without expecting anything and without a sense of obligation. You have gratitude for everything that you receive, because God is so generous and is always giving us what we need. When we have that awareness of gratitude, we act from generosity, because we start giving away what we receive. We don't keep it. We use it; we give it. It is a whole cycle. We receive and we give, and this is unconditional love.

This is the love that is patient and kind, that is not envious or boastful, arrogant or rude. This is the love that does not insist on its own way, is neither irritable nor resentful, does not rejoice in wrongdoing but rejoices in the truth. This is the love that bears all things, believes all things, hopes and things and endures all things. This is the love that never ends.

In the early days of Christianity, many referred to Jesus' followers as "People of the Way." The reason the church survived the persecutions and the skepticism, the political and social turmoil of the day was that small groups of people came together to remember the Master and practice his teachings. They gave of themselves and ostensibly made a difference in real people's real lives. They left footprints for the rest of us to follow.

Unfortunately, because of many factors in our world today, without actually articulating it

as such, we are having a largely unspoken debate about which religion is superior to others. But that is not the question we should be asking. The question we should ask is, How is the world becoming a better place because of the way I practice my religion? It is not a competition. It is a service, it is a responsibility and one that we cannot fully participate in if we are consumed by how people are thinking about us and how we can better project our images to the world.

None of that matters. We have to get back to faith first. We have to accept that there are limits to how far we can go in transferring our trust in what we can see to what we cannot see. So be it. Doubt is always a factor in faith. Get over it. Make a decision that you would rather live out of a worldview that has God in the center than one that is nihilistic.

And then take another risk. Frankly acknowledge that being able to control your life is an illusion. You cannot do it and sooner or later everyone comes to that sobering realization. And then let go of the fight you cannot win. Willingly hand over control to God and allow yourself to be guided by Spirit.

Now you will be free to love, to really love, to freely give without the fear of losing yourself in the process. We do not need to grasp and suck up resources in a futile attempt to protect ourselves from calamity and want. We will have genuine hope that is based upon our faith and we will be able to joyfully participate in meeting the needs of the world that God places at our feet.

So faith, hope and love abide. These three and the greatest of these is love.

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