

Love and Friendship

what is our understanding?

Introduction

Everyone appears to have an unwritten understanding of love. It is important to clarify our understandings, particularly in Circles of Support and Accountability. Because communication and understanding one another is so important in COSAs, and "love" is understood in so many ways, we attempt to have a common understanding of the various meanings of the word we are talking about when we communicate.

Love as sex (Eros)

For many people love is understood to mean having sex. Even in this understanding there are important differences. For some, sex is seen to be primarily self-gratification or satisfaction. In this understanding, love, interpreted as sex, is a very selfish process. It basically sees the other person - not as a person but as a physical object (necessity) for satisfying ones sexual needs or desires. Such an understanding appears to be more prevalent in men than in women. In such relationships, women often respond to the male desires because they feel noticed, accepted and/or appreciated by the male, even though this may not be the case.

For others who interpret love in sexual terms, it is understood there should be mutual satisfaction in the sexual process. This means there is mutuality--both persons feel it is important the other also enjoys the experience. This approach to sex can have many variations, but in a solid long term marriage or partnership relationship the sexual relationship is based on mutuality, not exclusively on self gratification. This type of relationship would be referred to as "Eros" love in the old Greek language (also used in the New Testament).

A good marriage or partnership relationship includes mutuality in sexual relations, but is based on much more than only the physical definition of love.

Friendship (Filiis)

Friendship also takes many forms, but has important common elements. Friendship is based on mutuality, which means a shared satisfaction and/or enjoyment in the relationship. It also means there is interest in the experiences, feelings, understandings and relationships of the friend. Discussions between friends will often go back and forth between them, sharing what has happened, enjoying a joke or experiences and sharing of problems as well as enjoyable events in their lives. Often the opinion of the other will be asked for because there is respect for the opinion of the friend.

I asked several Circles – both core members and volunteers what they thought were important elements in friendship. A range of important elements were listed. They included the following: acceptance, trust, respect, sharing (both good and bad experiences, as well as joy, laughter and fun), caring, helping each other, communication, fellowship, support, encouragement, freedom (from control of one person over another), knowing what one can expect from a friend, respecting boundaries, enjoying each others' company, honesty - being able to confide in the other, concrete help such as helping to learn to read, not judging and friendship is for the long haul, it is not a superficial “fly by night” event.

Friendship also includes being a sounding board in that other perspectives are gained from friends which assist a person to see different angles of a situation before reacting. Eating or having coffee together is a major element in friendship. Friends often spend time together in activities of work or recreation. Concern for the well-being of the other and sharing time together permeate friendship.

The above can be relationships between two persons or groups of people. Discussion of “friendship” is of immense importance for COSAs because COSAs are “friendship” circles. They are not professional therapeutic or surveillance mechanisms. Sometimes friendships are very close and intimate, sometimes they can be quite superficial – more in terms of an acquaintance.

COSAs initially are artificial friendship circles in that volunteers do not know the core member, and often the volunteers in the circle do not know each other. The beginning of a COSA often is getting acquainted and then the elements of friendship listed earlier grow as the members get to know one another. Because core members may have had a limited understanding of the nature of friendship it is important everyone in a COSA is aware of friendship boundaries to avoid complications. It is important boundary complications not be a basis on which Circles avoid friendship.

In the original Greek writing of the New Testament, “friendship” love was referred to as “filias”.

Family (Storge)

Another kind of love is familial love. This is the kind of relationship that exists in families who have a positive relationship. This includes relationships between spouses/partners, siblings and parents and children. The relationship between parents and children change as the children grow up. Adult children often see parents as friends as well as parents. Relationships with extended family can also be friendships as well as relatives. One often hears the comment “blood is thicker than water”, suggesting primary loyalties tend to be to the family. Families form an important bases and models for children to develop physically, emotionally, socially and spiritually in a wholesome way.

In some families familial love is not the basis in their relationships. Such situations lead to a multitude of problems, not only between partners, but also for the children who do not have the environment in which to develop a strong and positive perspective on life.

Love (Agape)

This is an additional understanding of Love, which is the basis of the most profound relationship. This kind of love, called Agape in the New Testament, also has many forms of expression. Basically this understanding of love means a person extends his/her concern beyond himself, his/her family and friends to others.. It extends concern and action to people who are strangers, or even enemies.

On a personal basis, this could take the form of responding to the needs of a person in poverty, or a stranger in the country – such as refugees. It is also often the basis for persons volunteering for

COSAs; for people who want to live a wholesome life in the community and society who need someone to support them in this process; for groups of people who are disadvantaged, such as the poor, handicapped or mentally ill in society and often are rejected.

Agape love motivates a person to advocate, not only for an individual, but also for society to change its attitudes and policies to improve the quality of life. In restorative justice, this can take the form of advocating for change to the criminal justice system so alternative measures are employed. It also takes the form of community education for restorative justice.

In the field of corrections and criminal justice, agape love would motivate people to have society change its attitudes, policies and programs in such a way to move towards reintegration, reconciliation, mediation, and even forgiveness. It would also promote accountability and taking responsibility. Agape love enables a volunteer to assist a person who is facing the problems of moving from a life of violence, exploitation and self interest or is caught up in the destructive cycle of living outside of the law to a productive life in society.

In lasting marriages or partnerships, all the elements of the three understandings of Love are foundational including mutuality in the physical relationship, friendship in day to day living, and a deep concern for the well being of the partner.

Love and God

Not only in Christianity, but also in all other major religions including native spirituality, relationship to God, the Creator or a Higher Being is basic. The Christian and Jewish communities refer to this dimension as a mutual love – from God to us, and us to God. In some other faiths, this might be more of an “awe” or “respect” relationship. Throughout history, human societies universally have had the concept of a relationship with God or a higher Being.

The most important values and commitments in persons’ or a community’s life is generally embodied in their relationship to God.

Conclusion

The objective in COSAs is to build friendship groups based of the elements of “friendship” which can be the basis for individual growth, development and well being. When in a COSA group, it is important to remember the nature of the relationship.

If persons are not comfortable being involved in a relationship of friendship, be that core members or volunteers, it is questionable if a circle can be meaningful.

Wikipedia has a good article on C.S. Lewis’ book [The Four Loves](#) which explores the nature of love from a Christian perspective. The article and the book are very good sources to explore further the nature of love.

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