

+In the Name of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Ghost. Amen+

Thomas Merton, the famous Cistercian monk and writer once reflected that many people have very mistaken images of those who go to live in a monastery. The popular perspective is that those within the cloister are somehow retreating or running away from this life and world, putting stress and irritation behind them, and entering a realm of relative peace and quiet. With his mischievous smile and wry humor he goes on to point out that in some ways reality is exactly the opposite of this idyllic picture, for in the monastic setting one is “stuck” with all the failings, irritable moods, unkind comments, and generally obnoxious habits that are a part of the rest of humankind, *with one exception*—In the monastery you cannot escape them. And on occasion all of these traits and more are found in just one brother!!! (It sort of sounds like marriage or family life!)

The **idea** of love is something we all will agree is a beautiful, virtuous, and good thing. We gladly celebrate the language and notion of love and being in love. It isn’t the idea that pains us so much as having to live it out. As one person at Twin Lakes said to me, “I would have no trouble at all loving my neighbor, **IF** I didn’t have to include _____.

“Beloved, let us love one another, for love is of God, and the one who loves is born of God and knows God.”(I Jo. 4:7) The author of the First Epistle of St. John is faced, within a generation of Christ, a divided community. On the one hand are those who hold that believing in Jesus is enough and they happen to be the “well-to-do”. On the other there is group who believed that the Word became Flesh, and that faith in Him had consequences in behavior. They held that love embodied entwines us with one another and with God, and in a sense “imitates” the Word enfleshed. For the Church there is an intimate connection between being “close to God” and loving our neighbor. “No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God abides in us and his love is perfected in us”. So HERE is the challenge: What does it mean to truly love rather than imagine that we love?

I have wondered what message a traveler from some other place or world, unfamiliar with our mores and behavior, would receive if they walked within our culture, watched our TV programs, and immersed themselves in our language. What image of human relationships would be captured by them? Go into any used book store and you will find mysteries and histories, technical books and entertainment, but the biggest section will be romance novels. You know the ones with “Eduardo” on the front bare-chested with some attractive female clinging precipitously to him. Turn on the TV to the

current soap operas (I guess they still exist) where longing and pleasure are mixed with deceit and manipulation. Or perhaps something more modern would reveal the willingness of people to sell their own dignity, self-esteem, and well-being for a little cash or least momentary notoriety. The selection of DVD's at Hollywood Video would provide views from "Love Is A Many Splendored Thing" to "You've Got Mail". And of course the radio would thunder out one ballad after another from "All You Need Is Love" to any assortment of tunes focused on love gained and lost. That visitor would no doubt come to realize that this thing called love was very much at the heart and core of our desires and lives. What KIND of love would it be? There is a place of danger for us today in how we view and reach for love. Much of what passes for true compassion and care is really little more than self-gain in a soft package. Few of us here today have not been in situations or known close friends who have had marriages interrupted when one person set out to "find themselves", because they were disappointed with the love they had. We have seen children used as battle points between parents where "Who do you love more?" becomes a tool of power. And many of us have watched others give gifts, but with so many strings attached they could choke out the unwary recipient. Each of these, while different in circumstance, share one thing in common; in them love serves the giver and not the one receiving.

John tells us to beware, for this is not what it means to be love Christ or the Father.

The real key this text reveals to us is in the verse, God is Love. You can read this in two ways. You can say God is LOVE, meaning that love defines God, (which could be a real problem in this culture with the skewed views of love we have mentioned), or you can read it as the author intends, GOD is love. It is God who defines the meaning of our relationship with Him, and it is seen most deeply in the way God has dealt with us. “In this the love of God was made manifest among us, that God sent his only Son into the world, so that we might live through Him. In this is love, NOT that we loved God, but that He loved us...” Consider the mystery and intensity of these statements, not as statements, but as living realities. I might care enough for one of you to give up my car. I might value your friendship sufficiently to let you stay in my house, provided you clean up after yourself! And it is conceivable that some of us might love one another enough to risk our own well-being to bring you to safety in a crisis. But who among us would give the life of our dearest intimate for someone else? To do so is to say to that other, “You are as valuable as the most precious thing that I have! That is astounding. This is precisely what God has done and continues to do for us, even now. It is the costliest thing that could be said

about HIM. You see how this is love which God defines?! All other expressions pale in comparison. When in our faith we even dare to risk caring with all our being, we come to gage and appreciate the deep well of God's heart. I John says that if anyone says he loves God, but hates his brother, he is a liar. That scares me!! What he means is that love is never isolated to a feeling or performed from a distance, but that hatred, the despising of another of God's creatures leads us away from any sense of what God has done for us. Anger with others is often a natural part of life and a response to being hurt. But counting another as worthless of the gifts of life is hatred. It is to rob ourselves and the other of what God gives. It is a self-inflicted wound.

The love Which God has for us in Christ, and which we share as a community, even when it seems not enough, too small or maybe even too insignificant is the only thing that will tear down the loneliness and pain of the world. Only it conquers all things and can stand up to all challenges. And the great thing about it is we don't have to create it, we simply risk giving it away. It may be in the most menial of situations that the clearest sign of God is signaled to the recipient. There is a story of a Scottish preacher who dreamed he had arrived at the Pearly Gates expecting some recognition for his earthly performance. St. Peter merely peered over his

glasses and went on reading his books asking the man's name. The minister was surprised that such a poor job of record keeping had been done and forcefully says, "Ian MacGregor", as if that would make all the difference in the world. He was met by a blank look and shake of the head. What? He asked. Have you not heard of me? I am famous in Edinburgh. Why people line up for hours before a service just to hear me. "No word has come of that said St. Peter." Well what about my going down to London to spend time in a shabby neighborhood with a poor serving girl? You know I missed a very important meeting at my church and went at my own expense. No, said St. Peter, we haven't heard of that either, and the doors remained closed. Finally, with the minister about ready to give up, Peter found something. Are you the Ian MacGregor who used to feed the sparrows on Princes Street? He answered that yes that was him. With a sweeping gesture St. Peter said, "Then come right in! The Lord of the sparrows wants to thank you." We are linked to God in that He first loved us and poured out His heart to get our attention. Our only viable response is to imitate what we have received. The size doesn't measure the significance.