

In 1984 a British-American rock band, Foreigner, released a song entitled "I Wanna Know What Love Is." A High school senior believed he knew what love is.

So, this young man said to his father at breakfast one morning, "Dad, I'm going to get married."

"How do you know you're ready to get married?" asked the father. "Are you in love?"

"I sure am," said the son.

"How do you know you're in love?" asked the father.

"Last night, as I was kissing my girlfriend good-night, her dog bit me, and I didn't feel the pain until I got home." Now, that's true love! Or is it?

"Love" is an all-purpose word in most people's vocabularies. We use it either to show our most profound feelings for others or our simple tastes for food or objects. It is possible to proclaim the love of God and chocolate in the same breath. Yet, there is a vast difference between "loving" and "liking." Love is a powerful emotion that can change us and others instantly.

From the commercial side, love is free. It can't be bought, sold, or traded. You can't make someone love you, nor can you prevent it from happening for any amount of money. You cannot stifle love, nor can it be made into a law. Love is not a substance, not a commodity, not even a marketable power source. Love has no territory, no borders; you can't touch it, but you can certainly feel it.

Our culture defines love, mainly in terms of self-interest. The late Frank Sinatra once said: "Money is for spending, friends are for taking care of, and women are for loving." This statement makes sense to those whose primary concern in life is for themselves. They find value in something only if it is useful to them.

But, if you look at Sinatra's statement with Sunday morning eyes, instead of Saturday night eyes, something troubles us by his remark. Are things and people valuable only in their usefulness to us? Too often, people ask themselves, "How can this person or thing be used to my advantage, my pleasure, or my security?" According to the world, love bases itself on self-interest; that's why they ask, "What's in it for me?"

But, in our Gospel reading today, Jesus introduced his followers to the most unusual aspect of life. He taught them about a way to love others with no concerns for themselves. Jesus showed them unconditional love in rescuing fallen women, helping enemy soldiers, and associating with sinners.

Unfortunately, not all people are lovable, yet all people need love. If we understand love superficially, in terms of favourable attraction, we will never love most people. Love is unchristian if withheld from any person or group. So, the Greeks came up with the word "Agape" to differentiate between romantic love and Christian love.

James Parker, a British Clergyman writes, The Greek word agape (love) seems to have been virtually a Christian invention -- a new word for a new thing (apart from about twenty occurrences in the Greek version of the Old Testament, it is almost non-existent before the New Testament). Agape draws its meaning directly from the revelation of God in Christ. It is not a form of natural affection, however, intense, but a supernatural fruit of the Spirit (Gal. 5:22). It is a matter of will rather than feeling (for Christians must love even those they dislike -- Matt. 5:44-48). It is the basic element in Christ-likeness.

(James Packer, *Your Father Loves You*, Harold Shaw Publishers, 1986.) Applying agape love to our life would mean a reversal of the way the world thinks of love.

Pollution is an environmental issue in Canada. But there are still places in Canada where nature remains relatively unspoiled and quiet. The majestic Rocky Mountains of Alberta soar skyward toward heaven. Part of the environment's purity is the washing it gets from hundreds of swift mountain rivers and streams. One of these streams runs into the upper Bow River in Banff National Park. It is known worldwide among anglers for trout fishing. The water rushes down the mountainside like it's late for a wedding. People who fish for trout in those rapids will tell you it is easier to start somewhere upstream and work your way downstream. After a couple of hours, it makes a big difference whether you are going downhill and with the current instead of uphill against it. It is hard work moving upstream.

In Luke's version, Jesus offers an understanding of love that requires a radical change in typical human behaviour. Jesus says, "Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you." To take these teachings seriously would involve an extreme reversal of the norm. Loving our enemies would mean moving upstream, against the flow of the world. It is natural to love them that love us, but it is supernatural to love them that hate us.

According to Jesus' teaching and by His example, He holds Christian to a higher standard. To be a follower of Christ means to love as Christ's loved. The issue for Christ's followers cannot be one of self-interest, but rather a devotion to God. Therefore, the Christian does not ask, "What's in it for me?" but "How might I be used by God to help this person or situation?" It's the difference between understanding love in terms of self-interest and seeing love as sacrificial self-giving. To achieve this kind of love requires patience for those who make demands on us and sympathy for those we do not understand. We will then grow toward the compassionate maturity of Jesus and see other people through Jesus loving eyes.

Amen!