

ON THE BEGINNING OF “LOVE”

This article is prompted by a cassette tape that a good friend of mine gave to me to listen to: it was a conference given by Kurt Vonnegut, Jr., American Novelist and Essayist, about 10 years ago entitled: “Love is too strong a word!” Mr. Vonnegut is renowned for his novels: “Cat’s Cradle” and “Slaughterhouse-Five!” He died in 2007.

What fascinated me about his talk was his handling of the word: “love.” Words are very important – and their use is to come from a context of charitable choice and intelligent selection. So often words are “slung around” in a very uncharitable and unintelligent – even unintelligible fashion.

In this article I have taken the basic concept that Mr. Vonnegut is presenting and placing it in a theological context: a Gospel setting!

His main point is this: the word “love” needs to be reserved for what is truly “loving” – and that this loving begins with “respect!” Therefore, we need to be substituting the word “respect” for the word “love” in many of its current applications: until such a time that the respect grows into real love!

I agree with this concept – and from the gospels – it would seem that Jesus would agree with it first!

Jesus, however, goes straight to the heart of the matter – and uses the word LOVE – because he is holding it up as the ideal; because he himself is living out all of its ramifications so that we will have him as a reference point TO LOVE; because his Father IS LOVE – and that he reflects THAT LOVE, and wants primarily to communicate THAT LOVE! But, I am sure that in all of the transitioning that Jesus is making from Old Testament to New Testament ideas and concepts he would be very happy if it began with “respect.”

Just as “fear of the Lord is the beginning of Wisdom” so too, perhaps, “respect is the beginning of love.”

I would also make the distinction at this point of two “aspects of love” – the first being, the self-sacrificial decision to live for others first; the

second being inseparably related: the overall attitude and perspective that we have for others and ourselves. Again, Jesus is all about demonstrating the integration of the two aspects! He humbly loved us, first – because he humbly loved his Father, and himself!

If we could only learn from him to do the same!

Since we are here on this planet, and we exist, it all begins with SELF-“respect.” It is a sad commentary to look around at the people we sometimes meet in our day, or see on television, or in magazines: who apparently are unfamiliar with true “self-respect.”

A person who respects him/her self knows that the life they have been given is a precious gift from God. Each life is custom outfitted with what God the Father and Creator knows that particular person will need *to live out the life of service that he has in mind for them!* The details of the living he leaves up to our discernment and decision making (with the help of his grace) – but each of us has a “true calling” – a “true place in his family” – if we choose to take it!

A person who respects him/her self knows that their spiritual life is very important and needs constant nourishment and support; as much, if not more than, the life of their bodies, which have been given to them to “transport their ‘personhood’ throughout the days of their lives” – until the day of resurrection when bodies and spirits will be once again joined in a new way: and life forever in the new Paradise will begin.

A person who respects him/herself knows that God has a perfect image of each and every “body” that he has created and he expects us to care for our bodies and with the discernment of the Spirit, fashion it as close to what he has in mind as possible – before death, which awaits us all! It is, therefore, not what we think of our bodies or the bodies of others that is the most important thing, but rather what God thinks of them and has in mind for them – and our “care program” ought to reflect his intentions and not our own!

Once, therefore, we have some sort of a true and consistent grasp of the idea and activity of “self-respect,” then it is much easier to move to the idea of “respect for others” as the starting point for “love.”

When we respect ourselves, we see ourselves not as objects but as subjects of God’s love, and stewards of his gifts. There is not much that is really “object-ive” about how we ought to regard ourselves and then others. If we see ourselves and others as “persons” created from the fabric of God’s love: then we realize that we all have at least LOVE in common – and we have the activity of loving as our vocation, which is a necessary part of the definition and dynamic of loving.

In our world society, and especially our American society it is very apparent that regarding each other as subjects possessing love and the capability of loving is not at all the norm. How much of the perspective that we have as we literally look at one another and perceive one another is based on primitive instincts of selfish, self-centered, personal gratification.

- people are regarded as objects for our own personal sense of power and mastery over others
- people are regarded as objects for our own personal wealth
- people are regarded as objects for our own personal sexual gratification
- people are regarded as objects for our own ease of comfort
- people are regarded as objects for our own glorification and exaltation

If only we could take to heart the gospel imperative of “true love” – modeled by Jesus, empowered by the Holy Spirit, then:

- people would be regarded as subjects, possessing their own freedom and decision making powers, subject only to the will of God for them
- people would be regarded as subjects, each possessing his/her own sense of true personal wealth, which ultimately is spiritual wealth: where a person’s heart would be where his/her true treasure is: heaven

- persons would be regarded as subjects, each possessing the magnificent gifts of masculinity and femininity which has its own spiritual laws, rights and duties as well as natural manifestations and expressions: sexuality is a personal gift from God to man and woman to reflect his own glory and the way he loves all of us on earth
- persons would be regarded as subjects, able to interact with each other in determining each other's needs on many levels, the hallmark of which would be the willingness to help the other for his/her own sake, for his own comfort, for his/her own happiness above our own.
- persons would be regarded as subjects, worthy of our acknowledgement, our encouragement and our praise

If each person could regard the other in beginning in these ways, then each would also receive what he/she gives, and the reciprocity of the dynamic of self-sacrificial loving: which is what the gospel is all about: would ripple a very long way.

This all starts with "RESPECT!"

And in fact, it was in play very long time ago, "in the beginning!" God the Father, in creating Adam and Eve out of love, RESPECTED them entirely and absolutely by not only giving them freewill to choose right from wrong, good from evil – he also respected them after they made a bad choice and lost a great many of his original gifts.

When he and his Son, Jesus, conceived the plan of salvation to reconcile mankind: Jesus RESPECTED everyone he ever came in contact with: always OFFERING the Kingdom of God, but never forcing it on anyone. He also respected each and every one of us so much so that he freed us from slavery to sin by his glorious death and resurrection so that we could truly be free to choose loving again!

The Holy Spirit can be defined, among his many other titles, as the "respect of God" – the freedom of God – the love of God – the compassion of God – the mercy of God! He can very reliably be called upon to enable RESPECT whenever and wherever it is needed.

If God, then so respects us – and has empowered us to respect others – perhaps it might be worth our while to freely choose to ask the help of the Spirit and to begin a real campaign of respect!

IT IS OUR DECISION!

If we could STOP and regard each other RESPECTfully – if only for short moments at a time, at first, then the spiritual law of love, if we give it permission, can begin true process of a development into LOVING!

The next step after RESPECT – seems to logically be COMPASSION! Once I truly respect you, then I can begin to really “feel your suffering with you” - which is what the word “compassion means.”

Then compassion is not a distant relative of MERCY – if I can feel your pain, then I can, with Spirit’s help, convey the very mercy of God himself, by doing something for you – helping you in your needs – aiding you in your spiritual growth.

This then leads to the doorstep of LOVING! When I respect you, and can have true compassion on you, and desire to show God’s mercy to you: then I CAN LOVE YOU! With all of the gifts that Baptism and Confirmation and Eucharist can give me – I can help YOU – with your material and spiritual needs – according to your needs and my own particular gifts, strengths and abilities.

IT ALL BEGINS WITH RESPECT!

LET US *AT LEAST* RESPECT ONE ANOTHER!

and one day LET US TRULY LOVE ONE ANOTHER – AS CHRIST HAS LOVED US! and live the reward that comes from putting others first: eternal life in our Father’s house: in heaven – as promised!

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Feast of St. Camillus de Lellis