



PRACTICES to BRING US CLOSER to GOD – LOVE

I've been thinking a lot about love lately. Not just because some of us celebrated Valentine's Day with families and friends recently. Rather, I have observed that tempers are short as people struggle with loss of jobs and homes, casualties of unending wars, high home mortgages on lowered home values, and tense relationships between the various religious faiths that surround us. This reminds me of the spiritual practice of love that we, as Christians, embrace. Jesus taught, "Love your enemies; do good to those who hate you."

As a minister and pastor for the past 23 years, I have continued to grow in my conviction that I must love everyone in the congregation which I serve. I may not particularly like what an individual says or does, but that is no excuse for me to not love that person. I may not want to spend my free time with that person, but when that man, woman, or youth needs the minister, I will be there, and fully present. I must treat each congregant with respect as a beloved child of God. I must treat all people as beloved children of God.

Part of this commitment on my part comes from my experience with unconditional love in my life. This is the kind of love I experienced in my nuclear family, most especially from my older sister. No matter what I did or did not do during my growing up days and, later, throughout my adulthood, my sister has always been present for me. She has always continued to love me. I know that it was through her that I particularly learned what God's unconditional love is.

My saving grace through some difficult times in my life, and in my ministry, has been those loving words from Isaiah 43: "I have called you by name, you are mine . . . when you pass through the waters, I will be with you, and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you; when you walk through fire you shall not be burned, and the flame shall not consume you."

Most of us have heard or read at some time 1 John 4:8: "Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love."

God is Love. Being made in God's image, I am, also, to be love.

Love must be a personal activity, one of those spiritual practices that will bring us closer to God. Love can never be just an abstract quality, something we debate or discuss.

When we look at the life of Jesus, we see the ways in which he modeled love for us. We read his many teachings of how we are to love each other.

Whenever I lead a small group through the book, *The Jesus Connection*, by Jan Linn, we do a particular exercise that relates to Jesus, his life, and his modeling of love for us. The Rev. Dr. Linn wrote about Christian spirituality: "It offers more than an idea or an example in Jesus. It is an invitation to know him, experience him, love him, and belong to him."

When a church group uses this book in our Covenant Evangelism Ministry (which we have done in three churches I have served), we always keep a journal and read one of the gospels along with Linn's book. For each portion of the gospel assigned for that particular week we answer, in detail, the questions: "What do I love about Jesus in this particular passage," and "How can I love like Jesus loved in this passage." Then, as a group, we share our ideas and learn from each other.

How, then, do we practice this discipline of love in our daily, hourly lives?

Mother Teresa advised, "spread love everywhere you go; first of all in your own home. Give love to your children, to your wife or husband, to a next-door neighbor." (A Gift for God. Harper and Row, 1975.) You will note that she did not say, "only if they treat you well; only if their faith tradition is the same as your faith tradition."

I find it helps if I know how much God loves me, and that no one can diminish that love. Then I am free to love another person. Bill and Gloria Gather wrote a beautiful song with words, "I am loved . . . I can risk loving you; for the One who knows me best loves me most." Sometimes I find it helps to say or sing in my mind those words when I'm facing a difficult, hard-to-love person.

It is also a good reminder for me, every morning during my devotions to pray, "God, help me to be a blessing to somebody today. Help me to show your love to another person."

Love for all God's children is a much-needed spiritual practice for those of us who claim Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord.