

One of my all-time favorite rock albums is *Bat Out of Hell* by Meat Loaf. One of the songs on it has an incredibly poignant chorus:

*I want you, I need you
But there ain't no way I'm ever gonna love you
Now don't be sad
'Cause two out of three ain't bad*

The great C.S. Lewis was long dead by the time this song came out. But I think he would take issue with this song, though perhaps not for the reason you might expect.

In his book, *The Four Loves*, Lewis talks about wanting and needing and loving.

Meat Loaf may sing,
*I want you, I need you
But there ain't no way I'm ever gonna love you*

But Lewis actually talks about wanting and needing as characteristics of one type of love. Not the highest kind of love certainly. But as a part of a certain type of love.

Lewis distinguishes between what he terms "need-love" and "gift-love."

Need-love is about loving in order to meet our own needs.
Gift-love is about loving for the sake of the other.

To quote Lewis,
"Need-love says of a woman 'I cannot live without her'; Gift-love longs to give her happiness, comfort, protection—if possible, wealth."¹

Need-love, at heart, is about what you can do for me. It's about our emptiness reaching out to another, trying to grasp or acquire what the other can give us or do for us. At heart, need-love is circular. I reach out to you only for what I can get in return.

On the other hand, gift-love is about giving without expecting anything in return. And it is the kind of love God gives us. To quote Lewis again,

"In God there is no hunger that needs to be filled, only plenteousness that desires to give."²

And this is the kind of love Jesus is talking about in our Gospel lesson.

"I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another."³

¹ C.S. Lewis, *The Four Loves*, p. 33

² C.S. Lewis, *The Four Loves*, p. 175

This is one of those statements of Jesus that we can often overly sentimentalize. Love one another. Let's all hold hands and sing "Kumbaya."

But we have to remember the context.

We're at the Last Supper. Immediately before these words, Judas has left the building; Judas has gone out to betray Jesus. John says, "(Judas) immediately went out. And it was night."⁴

It was night. It was the darkest time. The light of the world was about to be betrayed. The Lord of Life and Light was about battle with the forces of death and darkness. So we're perched right on the edge impending betrayal and the crucifixion. And Jesus is giving last minute instructions to his disciples.

At the Last Supper, Jesus gives his disciples a new commandment. And this commandment is a doozy: "Love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another." This is an incredibly high standard.

Around Jesus' time, there's a story that a young man once approached the famous Jewish Rabbi Hillel. The young man asked the Rabbi to teach him the whole of the law. Rabbi Hillel replied, "What you do not want to have done to you, don't do it to others. The rest of the law is only commentary."

In Matthew and Luke's Gospels, Jesus changes this statement up a bit with what we call the Golden Rule: "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you."

Rabbi Hillel stated things in negative terms. "If you don't want it done to you, don't do it to others." Or "Don't do bad things to other people that you wouldn't want to have happen to yourself."

The Golden Rule turns things around and makes them positive. Instead of don't do bad things to others, the Golden Rule says do good.

Do those good things to other people that you would like to have done to you. Treat people like you want to be treated. The positive Golden Rule is more difficult than what Rabbi Hillel says. Don't do bad things is somewhat reactive. Do good is more proactive, and much more difficult. Do no harm is difficult enough. But do good is even harder.

And yet, in today's Gospel, Jesus is calling us to a higher standard still. Jesus is not just saying, "Love one another." Jesus is not just saying, "Do good." Jesus is not just saying, "Love others as you love yourself." All of these things are difficult enough.

³ John 13:34-35

⁴ John 13:30

But Jesus says something remarkable. Jesus says something almost impossible to comprehend. Jesus says, "Love one another, as I have loved you." Not love others like you love yourself, but love others in the same way that God loves you.

Love one another, not with any hint of need-love. Love one another with total gift-love.

This is amazing. Jesus says love each other in the same way I have loved you, love each other in the same way that God has loved you.

When I hear this, I'm tempted to say, "No way. Lord, you've got to be kidding. Lord, you're awfully naive. Lord, you don't know what you're asking, you don't know what people are like. You don't know what people are capable of. You don't know the terrible things that people can do."

But Jesus does know. He has just sent Judas out, knowing full well that Judas will betray him. Jesus does know what human beings are capable of. And Jesus nonetheless says, "Love one another, just as I have loved you."

It's a statement that's immensely challenging. Yet it's also a statement of profound good news.

You are deeply loved by God. You are precious in the sight of God. God loves you more than you can love anyone else. God's love for you is greater than any human love. Human love is imperfect. But God's love is perfect. Human mothers and fathers sometimes fail. But God's love for you will never fail. As the Psalmist says, "Even though my father and my mother forsake me, the Lord will sustain me." The love of the best mother on her best day only gives us a glimpse of the wonderful love of God.

God loves you so much that God created you. God loves you so much that God sent Jesus Christ to live, to die, and to live again. God sent his Son to redeem you, literally to purchase you, to buy you back from the power of sin and death. God loves you so much that God sent the Holy Spirit, God's own presence to be with you, and among you, and in you. And God loves you so much that God wants union with you. In our reading from Revelation, we read of the final consummation, the final union between God and humanity, the union between Christ and the Church, the wedding of the lamb. God calls you to a union so intimate, that the image of bride and groom is used to describe it. God calls you to union; God calls you to a covenanted relationship; a relationship begun in the waters of baptism, and nurtured with the bread and wine of the Eucharist.

God loves you, and God calls you to love.

But God doesn't just call you to love. God doesn't just set an impossibly high standard and expect you to live up to it. God in his overflowing and wonderful gift-love offers us his gift-love as a gift to us.

I quote C.S. Lewis again, with the proviso that he wrote these words in 1960 and they're not in gender inclusive language.

Lewis says,

"(God) communicates to men a share of His own Gift-love... Divine Gift-love in the man enables him to love what is not naturally loveable; lepers, criminals, enemies, morons, the sulky, the superior and the sneering."⁵

In other words, the ability to learn to love others, the ability to grow in loving others is a grace, a gift from God. It is something we have to work at and grow into. But it is also a gift from God, helping us to grow to be more and more loving, more and more like Jesus himself.

He first loved us. He gave himself for us.

He asks us to love. He asks us to exhibit gift-love for others.

And the gift of his gift-love enables us to give gift-love to others.

"By this," Jesus says, "everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another."

⁵ C.S. Lewis, *The Four Loves*, p. 177