According to the apostle Paul, love is the greatest gift. To love and be loved is humankind’s deepest yearning. Love is nearly universally affirmed as the heart and soul of religious faith. But what do we mean by “love”? We say we love our parents, we love our children, we love our spouses, we love dear friends. We also love pizza. Or would love it if the Ravens beat the Giants. And we also say God loves us and we love God.

*What IS love?*

I am not talking about familial or romantic love, of course, but the kind of love Jesus lived and John and Paul wrote about. What the ancient Greeks called *agape* love, ultimate love, spiritual love. In her autobiography (*Me*) actress Kathryn Hepburn wrote such *love means..I put you and your interests and your comfort ahead of my own interests and my own comfort…Love has nothing to do with what you are expecting to get – only with what you are expecting to give – which is everything.* (LP 1:3:30)

Psychiatrist and writer M. Scott Peck gives us a more formal, but very workable definition of love: *love is the will to extend one’s self for the purpose of meeting one’s own or another’s spiritual growth.*

To say GOD LOVES THE WORLD makes sense, using Peck’s definition. For what else does God yearn for us than our spiritual fulfillment and growth? As we read in John 3:16, *God so LOVED THE WORLD that he gave his only begotten son, that whosoever believeth on him should not perish, but have everlasting life.* God loves the world – God loves US – for God so longs for humanity to be wholly and fully complete that God gives completely of himself for us. God loves us.

Theologian Reinhold Niebuhr said that the genius of the message of Jesus was his declaration that all of religious faith is summed up with the words THOU SHALT LOVE. Thou shalt love. How do you command love? You can’t of course, yet that is precisely what Jesus demands we do if we are to be his followers. *Thou shalt love*. How can we do that? We can’t, if by love you mean sentiment or emotion. But the love Jesus calls us to live by is NOT an emotion. Christian love is an action and an act of the will. *Christian love is the will to extend one’s self for the purpose of meeting one’s own or another’s spiritual growth.*

Such love is the DISTINGUISHING MARK OF THE CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY. The tie that binds Christians together. *I John* is the simplest explanation of Christian faith in the NT. John says, if you do not have love, you do not have faith: *How does God’s love abide in anyone who has the world’s goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses to help?* For John, love which is not enacted within the community of faith, is not love at all. John pulls no punches: *Those who say “I love God,” and hate their brothers or sisters, are liars.* If you do not put your love into action, you do not love God.

As a mark of the Christian community, *love also describes the relationship of the church to the world OUTSIDE the church.* The church is never AGAINST the world. For sure, the church challenges the powers and evil forces and structure of human society, but the church is not AGAINST the world – the church LOVES the world, as God loves the world. The church is always FOR the world.
And the church cannot separate itself FROM the world. Over the centuries many Christians have sought to leave the world behind, to go into retreat or to be in as little contact with the world as possible. Withdrawing from the world may bring solace and peace to individual Christians, but to leave the world to its own devices is hardly an act of LOVE, and love is the church’s sole calling. The church simply cannot leave the world alone.

To love the world the church must be and remain in full relationship with the world, for the sake OF the world. Which means the church is going to get hurt and beaten and dirty. Think of your own loving relationships. For sure, they bring you joy. But everytime you have loved somebody, have you not ended up getting hurt as well? Of course you have. It comes with loving.

So also the church often takes a licking when it tries to love the world. For to love the world requires being in a loving relationship WITH the world, engaging the world. Loving the world means getting mixed up in politics. Loving the world means dealing with the moral and social issues of our times. Not just saying, “we love the poor!” Loving the poor means seeking and finding and enacting ways of building up the lives the poor. It is not enough to say “we love the outcasts, those rejected and despised by the world.” To love them we must know them and welcome them, and treat them with respect and dignity. To welcome them into our home and our lives as we did during CARITAS this last week. Love is the mark of the church.

And LOVE IS THE MARK OF THE CHRISTIAN LIFE. The old way of putting it is to say love is the basis of Christian “piety”, or Christian holiness. We don’t use the world piety much anymore – few people aspire to be known as “pious persons”. But pious persons, holy persons, persons who live by love, are who and what we are called to be and become. The author of Colossians put it this way, above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. To live with love in every dimension of your life. To extend and give of yourself for the sake of your and another’s spiritual growth.

The life of love does not happen spontaneously. It is an act of the will. A self-imposed discipline. A very intentional response to what God does for us. In the gospel of John, Jesus says, As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love...[for] This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. Because he or she has experienced God’s love, the Christian loves, the Christian LEARNS to love. To give of one’s self for the sake of another.

Christ commands us to love, but we love BY CHOICE. Because God loves us, we WANT to love. And we want to love those who NEED our love, not just those whom WE need to love and those who love us in return. As Jesus said in his Sermon on the Mount, If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners love those who love them (Luke 6:32).

It is out of love that we choose to not return evil for evil. It is out of love that we choose to practice kindness. It is out of love that we are filled with compassion for those who are suffering. It is out of love that we pray for our enemies and for those who despise us. It is out of love, Christian love, that we respect and work with persons, even when we disagree with them. It is out of love, Christian love, that we look for the best in others and seek the best FOR others.

Perhaps you are saying to yourself, “That’s fine and dandy for those who are pious, those who are holy. I can’t do that. I can’t just forgive and love anybody, must less everybody.” Well said. For sure, none of us are “saints”, if by that you mean perfectly pious people. But we all can move closer to those ideals our Lord lays before us, for we are all CALLED to move closer to the life of love lived by Jesus. We are called to grow, and we grow spiritually not so much through some warm sentiment in our hearts as through an act of our wills.
In his book *Mere Christianity*, C.S. Lewis wrote for those who have trouble loving: "Do not waste your time bothering whether you 'love' your neighbor; *act as if you did.* As soon as we do this, we find one of the great secrets. When you are behaving as if you loved someone, you will presently come to love him. If you injure someone you dislike, you will find yourself disliking him more. If you do him a good turn, you will find yourself disliking him less."

When we choose to live by love, two things happen: First, WE GIVE THE GIFT OF LOVE TO OTHERS. Those whom we love are blessed BY our love. Through our love, the one we love grows. And another thing happens when we love: we RECEIVE the gift of a love filled life. WE grow. When we GIVE the gift of love, we RECEIVE the gift of love.

During the period of the missionary expansion of the church in the 18th and 19th centuries, there were many persons who first heard of Christ through missionaries from another culture. Often the good news was not heard and received with joy, but with suspicion. For like us, some missionaries talked more about Christian love than they lived Christian love. I heard of one missionary who went to some distant, backward land and began his work. He preached the gospel, but not one of the native peoples made a profession of faith. They attended his weekly services. They listened to his message. But they did not believe.

One Sunday the missionary preached on love, using a text from the Sermon on the Mount: If anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also; and if anyone wants to take your coat, give your cloak as well. After the service a man came to his house and asked for a chair. A little startled, the missionary gave him one. The next day the man returned, and this time he asked for a table. Again the missionary, somewhat befuddled, complied. On subsequent days, the man returned, asking for other household items until the missionary’s house was bare. The next day the missionary awakened to find all of his belongings on the front lawn, and the man at his front door. “I have nothing left” the missionary announced. “I do not need or want any of your belongings,” the man replied. “I only wanted to know if you mean what you said about love. Now, that I know that you do, tell me about your God.”

God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them.

**Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God.** AMEN.

*John 15:9-17*

9 As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love. 10 If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father’s commandments and abide in his love. 11 I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete.

12 This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. 13 No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends. 14 You are my friends if you do what I command you. 15 I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father. 16 You did not choose me but I chose you. And I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last, so that the Father will give you whatever you ask him in my name. 17 I am giving you these commands so that you may love one another.

*I John 4:7-21*

7 Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. 8 Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love. 9 God’s love was revealed among us in this way: God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him. 10 In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins. 11 Beloved, since God loved us
so much, we also ought to love one another. 12 No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God lives in us, and his love is perfected in us.

13 By this we know that we abide in him and he in us, because he has given us of his Spirit. 14 And we have seen and do testify that the Father has sent his Son as the Savior of the world. 15 God abides in those who confess that Jesus is the Son of God, and they abide in God. 16 So we have known and believe the love that God has for us.

God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them. 17 Love has been perfected among us in this: that we may have boldness on the day of judgment, because as he is, so are we in this world. 18 There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear; for fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not reached perfection in love. 19 We love because he first loved us. 20 Those who say, “I love God,” and hate their brothers or sisters, are liars; for those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen. 21 The commandment we have from him is this: those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also.