

6th SUNDAY OF EASTER – B (May 17, 2009)
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I'd guess that most of us have played the word association game at one time—someone says a word and you say the first word that comes to your mind in response. For example, someone says 'brother' and you might say 'sister'. If someone says 'summer', our young people may well say 'vacation', looking forward to the end of another school year in just a couple of weeks. And if someone says 'Iowa', I would of course respond 'State Cyclones'—a very natural response...

Now: if I say the word 'God', what's the first word that comes to your mind? A number of possibilities come to mind: creator, heaven, judge, worship, pray—and many others like that. St. John in today's second reading (from his first letter) gives us the best answer of all, the best definition or description of God, and it is simplicity itself: 'God is love.' We can never say enough about God, nor can we say everything there is to say about God. But all those other things are ultimately based on the fundamental truth that God is, first of all, love. In the gospel, J expands on the truth of genuine love and what it calls us to be: "As the Father loves me, so I also love you... This is my commandment: love one another as I love you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends."

So what is love? How would you define or describe it? Frankly, it's not the easiest thing to do. I ask the engaged couples I work with, and they often struggle with it—this, despite the countless books, poems, songs and movies that have tried to get at the heart of love. You can always count on the youngsters to give an interesting perspective—five-year-old Karl said that 'love is when a girl puts on perfume and a boy puts on shaving cologne and they go out and smell each other.' Just try to visualize that... Then there was seven-year-old Brian who commented on the role of physical appearance in love: "It isn't always just how you look. Look at me, I'm handsome as anything and I haven't got anybody to marry me yet." No problem with low self-esteem there! Finally, there's the story of the married couple at home one evening, and the husband is watching a ball game on TV. The wife, feeling a little romantic, asks "Honey, do you love me more than baseball?" He paused a moment, then said "Well, I love you more than hockey..." So much for the romantic mood...

Back to the question: what is love? It may be helpful to say at least a bit about what love is not. First, love is not just liking someone or something. Archbishop Fulton Sheen once noted that liking comes from emotions and from one's temperament. Along the same lines, love is not just a matter of feelings. In his encyclical on love (*Deus Caritas Est*), Pope Benedict made the important point that 'love is not merely a sentiment. Sentiments come and go. A sentiment can be a marvelous first spark, but it is not the fullness of love.' Feelings of romance, the reality of physical attraction are real and they can be marvelous, but they are only the beginning and by themselves cannot provide any lasting basis for love.

Genuine, lasting love goes way beyond feelings and emotions that can swing back and forth, that can come and go with the moods of the moment. After all, we don't always feel warm and loving—sometimes we just aren't having a good day or we may have gotten up on the proverbial wrong side of the bed. You can't always help how you feel, but you can always choose how you will act in response to your feelings. Love, in fact, is that decision, that act of one's free will, the conscious choice to give and sacrifice and devote yourself to the one you love—even if you might not exactly like that person at that particular moment. That is why, e.g., the central act of a marriage ceremony is the man and woman freely making their promises to love each other for the rest of their lives. They don't promise merely to like each other, they don't promise that they will never be frustrated or annoyed with each other—but they do promise their love. Again, love is that conscious, free choice to commit oneself to the other—'in good times and in bad, in sickness and in health.'

Parents and children, I think you know what this means in your relationships with each other. I can easily imagine that the kids might not always *like* Mom and Dad—especially when they won't let them get the latest video game or cell phone or let them stay out later at night. And I can also easily imagine that parents might not always *like* what the kids do or how they act. And it just might happen that tempers rise, angry words are exchanged and doors get slammed. But parents and children both need to remember that love, freely and unconditionally given and gratefully received, still is and needs to be there—love that goes beyond the emotions and the feelings of the heated moment. You have heard me mention Peter Kreeft before, one of my favorite contemporary authors. He once wrote about his six-year-old son who asked him: “Daddy, why do you love me?” He writes: “I began to give the wrong answers, the answers I thought he was looking for: ‘you’re a great kid. You’re good and smart and strong.’ Then, seeing his disappointment, I decided to be honest: ‘Aw, I just love you because you’re mine.’ I got a smile of relief and a hug: ‘Thanks, Daddy.’”

A parent’s love for the child doesn’t depend on the grades on his report card or how well she behaves. One spouse’s love for the other doesn’t depend on everything in life and marriage proceeding smoothly and argument-free. Remember Jesus’ words in the gospel: “Love one another as I love you.” How does Jesus love us? Do I even have to point to the crucifix again to remind us of how Jesus loves us? He gave himself, sacrificed himself, literally died for us, holding nothing back for himself. As Pope Benedict said, “this is love in its most radical form”. This is also the point that St. John makes so importantly in that second reading: the source, the origin of love is not to be found in us, but instead in God. “In this is love: not that we have loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as expiation for our sins.”

God is the first and original lover—the one who first loves and who is love. He is the perfect example of love because he gave us all: his Son, crucified and risen, so that we can rejoice forever in his kingdom. Our part, as the Holy Father says, is to offer our love as ‘the response to the gift of love with which God draws near to us.’ Love—so much more than mere feelings and emotions. It can include them, but it goes way beyond them. Love is the free, conscious gift of ourselves to God and to others—the willingness and desire to say ‘no’ to self so that we can say ‘yes’ to the other who we love. Love is always possible to give and to live, by the grace of God. That’s because love is our free and grateful response to the God who first has already, fully and perfectly loved us.