

Homily for Lent Week I 2019  
*What's love . . . ?*

“Is love a fancy or a feeling?”

If you are a fan of the movie *Sense and Sensibility* you may recognize this snippet of sonnet by British poet Hartley Coleridge.

In the movie, passionate Marianne uses this as a foil to tease her practical and reserved sister, Elinor, about the object of Elinor’s affections.

You could say that Jane Austen’s book about these two sisters, is an exploration about what love is and what love is not.

Austen tells a story of two sisters, one practical and one passionate, and asks us to consider which is more important when it comes to love—the head or the heart?

Is love confined to the heart or does our mind a part to play?

This may seem like an odd question.

But what we tend to forget, or perhaps were never aware of, throughout much of human history feelings just didn’t matter—

In fact, emotions were “suspect” in the ancient world.

Stories like *The Iliad* or even *Romeo and Juliet* were not celebrations of love but warnings about the potential negative consequences of love, of how romantic love can potentially ruin everything.

For most of human history, people didn’t marry because of their feelings for one another.

As I said, feelings just didn’t matter in the ancient world.

Marriages were economic arrangements that promoted survival and, sometimes, prosperity of both extended families.

In fact, the ancient Greeks warned thought “feelings” of love were not just a liability, they were a kind of “sickness.”

But this all changed when new economic realities cross-pollinated with ideas that emerged from the Age of Enlightenment, ideas about individual rights and the pursuit of individual happiness. These eventually led, in the 19<sup>th</sup> century to the Age of Romanticism. Suddenly people's feelings mattered. The new ideal was not only to marry for love but that that love was to live on in bliss for all eternity. It was only until relatively recently—150 years—that the ever popular “happily ever after” ideal was born.

By now you are probably asking yourself why I am giving a quick and dirty history on the history of love.

Well, it is because most of us, when we speak of love, mainly conceive of it in the terms of Romanticism.

A lot of emphasis on feeling and a lot less emphasis on the head.

Romanticism is wonderful.

However, when we define love merely as a feeling, we are in danger of loving not wisely, but too well.

But it has turned subsequent generations too much toward *sensibility*—like the sister Marianne,

we rely too much on a capacity for sensation or feeling.

Sense, as in mature judgment, prudence, and wisdom

--like the sister Elinor—is less associated when we speak about love.

Now most of us are probably aware of the different kinds of love—identified by the ancient Greeks as

*Philia* for the affection between friends;

*Eros* for the physical intimacy of lovers;

*Storge* for the affection between parents and children;

and *Agape* for unconditional love,

specifically the love of God for humanity.

And it is this last “love”—*agape*—

is the love story the bible tells about God and us and all of creation.

*Agape* is about both sense and sensibility.

It is about both a matter of the heart and the head,  
and the soul for that matter.

As Thomas Aquinas defined it, *agape* is “to will the good of another.”

That is very like my personal favorite definition of love  
from the late Dr. M. Scott Peck, author of *The Road Less Traveled*.

Dr. Peck wrote that love is “The will to extend one’s self  
for the purpose of your own or another’s growth—  
in all dimensions—physically, emotionally, intellectually,  
and, especially, spiritually.”

“Love,” he wrote, “is an act of will—both in intention and in action.

Will also implies choice.

We do not have to love. We choose to love.”

What would the world be like if we all adopted  
that definition of love?

If we willed to extend ourselves for the purpose of our own  
or another’s spiritual growth?

This is God’s love for us and all the world.

This is what the apostle Paul is writing about  
in that 13<sup>th</sup> chapter of his first letter to the Corinthian church.

Let’s use this definition to hear anew what Paul was trying to say:

*If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels,*

*but do not will the spiritual growth of another,*

*I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal.*

*If I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all  
knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains,*

*but do not will the spiritual growth of another, I am nothing.*

*If I give away all my possessions, and if I hand over my body so that I  
may boast, but do not will the spiritual growth of another,*

*I gain nothing.*

To will (to choose) my own and another’s spiritual growth  
requires patience, kindness, it has no room for envy or boasting  
nor is it arrogant or rude.

To will (to choose) my own and another's spiritual growth does not insist on doing it my way; and there is no irritability or resentment over a different way of being and doing.

To will (to choose) my own and another's spiritual growth is to rejoice in the truth and not in wrongdoing.

To will the good sustains us so we can bear all circumstances, and believe and hope that with God all things are possible.

We endure when we will the good because *agape* is from God and God's love is eternal.

We know only a small portion of the ocean of God's love.

But because God loves me and wills my good and my maturity,

I grow nourished by God's grace

and I can learn to choose, to will what is good for myself and for others.

Now, in this world we live and walk by faith, hope and the will for the common good, and the greatest of these is to

will (to choose) the good of another.

This is love that is both head and heart,  
both sense and sensibility.

God so willed the good that people found grace in the wilderness.

God so willed the good of the whole world,

that God gave his only Son that we might have life abundantly.

God so wills the good in Christ for us,

that nothing can separate us from that *agape*.

What's love?

Is love a fancy or a feeling?

No, love is "an ever-fixed mark"

that wills our good through time and tempest, trials and temptations.

If, as scripture and even the poets point out, love is as love does,

then love is God and God is love in intention and in action

for every one of us now and forever.

And God loves us all both wisely and well.