



INNER CITY MISSION

helping the homeless find their way home

“For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat...I was a stranger and you invited me in.”

-Matthew 25:35

Springfield, IL 62702 • 726 N Seventh Street • (217) 525-3940 • www.innercitymission.net

Dear Friends of the Mission,

They say love makes the world go round, and statistics show it also lends a big hand to our retailers. By the time Valentine’s Day comes and goes each February, fifty-eight million pounds of chocolate will have been purchased and eaten, 110 million roses recline in their vases, and 145 million Valentine cards are being laid to rest in dresser drawers.

Love has come and gone, or so it appears.

The word *love* is common to every people group and language in the world, and is talked about and used in countless ways. It’s also the greatest commandment given by Jesus. “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind,” and, “Love your neighbor as yourself.” Yet, what is love?

When Elaine came to the mission two decades ago, my wife and I thought we understood love. We had been raised in the church and had gone to Bible college and studied under some wonderful professors. Early on, we had recognized the importance of love and the vital role it played in the gospel of Jesus Christ, and we had no problem citing scripture verses to back it up.

So when boisterous, fun-loving Elaine challenged me to explain love one day, I thought I had the answer. I recited John 3:16, **“For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish, but have everlasting life.”** At the time, I thought this verse would help Elaine understand love better, but when I finished, she was scowling at me.

“I’ve heard that verse many times, and I don’t like it,” she said. “Guys at recovery quote it all the time, saying stuff like, ‘God wants everybody to give, so that means you need to give me what I want.’” She sighed. “I’m tired of that kind of love. I need something real.”

Feeling somewhat deflated, I turned to I Corinthians 13, the popular “love chapter” often quoted in wedding vows. “Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast. It is not proud,” and so on. After reading and expounding on it, I closed my Bible and waited for her response.

She crossed her arms. “I don’t need a sermon, Scott. I need a something simple that I can use in my everyday life. **I need to know what love is so I can recognize it when I see it. I also need to know how to give it.**”

Her words stopped me in my tracks. At that moment, I knew I had missed it. Elaine wanted a practical, working definition of real love, and I didn’t have one. After a long pause, I said, “Let me work on it. I need more time to think about this and pray.”

A few days later, after much seeking and praying, I met with Elaine in the shelter office. I gave her my Bible and asked her to read John 3:16 aloud. She scoffed. “I told you I already know that verse, and I don’t like it. It doesn’t help me understand love.”

“Stay with me on this,” I said. “I believe I found the answer you’re looking for in this verse. If you read it aloud, we can break it down together.”

She began reading, **“For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son...”**

I stopped her there. “So what did he give?” I asked.

“His only son.”

“Okay, and what was Jesus?”

Elaine looked confused. “I just told you he was God’s son.”

“You’re right. He was God’s son. But I didn’t ask who was Jesus. I asked what was Jesus?”

She stared at me blankly.

“Jesus was *what was needed* for a broken world to find salvation, forgiveness, and wholeness. At the perfect time in history, God sent his son as a light in a dark world to take people’s sins, so we could be forgiven and saved, if willing. In this, we all have an opportunity not only to repent and turn from our unhealthy attachments and rebellion against God, but we get to turn *toward* him and be in relationship.

“Now, what does the rest of the verse say?”

Elaine read, **“...that whoever believes in him shall not perish, but have everlasting life.”**

“What is everlasting life?”

“Heaven, I suppose,” she said, adding a smile. “I did go to Sunday School a few times.”

I chuckled. “You have a good memory. Yes, God was offering the kingdom of heaven, eternal life, for all who are willing to accept his son in faith. Revelation 21 tells us there will be no more pain, crying, or mourning in heaven—which means it’s a place of never-ending joy and peace. It’s the perfect love-gift to the world. And in this, God is showing *us* how to love. Here is your practical definition:

“Love is giving what is needed for lasting joy and peace.”

“So, Elaine, when a guy tells you he loves you, ask yourself: Does he care about my long-term wellbeing, the state of my soul, or is he offering a momentary high with promises of fun?”

“I know that one,” she said, muttering under her breath.

“And then ask, what would it be like if spouses gave each other exactly what the other person needs for lasting joy and peace? Or if parents gave their children what each one needs for long term stability in life, instead of trying to fulfill their own ambitions or make a name for themselves?”

“I would like that,” she said, wiping a tear. Her father had always been gone on business trips.

“Well, do you think you can use this definition of love in your life?”

She nodded slowly. “I think so...but don’t be surprised if I have more questions.”

From that day forward—which was more than twenty years ago—Inner City Mission has put into practice this definition of love. We hope to give every person exactly what they need to find God’s lasting joy and peace in life. It may not be what they ask for, or even what they think they need, but our prayer is that God gives our staff the wisdom to know what each person needs for long term stability in life. Take care, friend, and God bless!

In His Service,

Scott & Connie Payne
Inner City Mission