



“REAL LOVE”

Today’s second and third readings are all about love. The word love is used *nine* times in the second reading and *nine* times in the gospel.

Last weekend I opened a book on love that I have had for a couple of years. It is called *Real Love—The Truth About Finding Unconditional Love & Fulfilling Relationships* by Greg Baer M.D. It’s a bit unusual to have a medical surgeon write a book on love since they are so busy taking care of peoples bodies. The book REAL LOVE is based on the author’s painful search for REAL love in his own life. I have only read bits and pieces of the book so far. I intend to read all of it as I have found the parts that I have looked at to be very interesting. Baer states that when we grow up without the experience of REAL love—i.e. unconditional love, we will have a big empty spot in our hearts that will impact our relationship with ourselves and others in a very negative way. Baer states that while most of us may *say* that we grew up with REAL or unconditional love, the truth may in fact be different. While our parents may have loved us as best as they knew how, the truth may be that we did not grow up actually believing that we were *unconditionally* loved. We might ask ourselves: Did our parents *delight* in us? Did they *express* their love in very visible and tangible ways? Did we believe that they loved us even when we messed up?

Baer writes REAL LOVE is what we need to experience in order for us to experience genuine happiness. He writes.

Real Love is caring about the happiness of another person without any thought for what we might get for ourselves. When we give Real Love, we’re not disappointed, hurt, or angry, even when people are thoughtless or inconsiderate or give us nothing in return - including gratitude - because our concern is for their happiness, not our own. Real Love is unconditional.

It’s Real Love when other people care about our happiness without any concern for themselves. They’re not disappointed or angry when we make our foolish mistakes, when we don’t do what they want, or even when we inconvenience them personally.

Sadly, few of us have either given or received that kind of love, and without it we experience a terrible void in our lives, which we try to fill with money, work, power, food, approval, sex, and entertainment. But no matter how much of those substitutes we acquire, we remain empty, alone, afraid, and angry, because the one thing

we really need is Real Love. Without it, we can only be miserable; with it our happiness is guaranteed.

When I use the word happiness, I do not mean the fleeting pleasure we get from money, sex, and conditional approval. Nor do I mean the brief feeling of relief we experience during the temporary absence of conflict or disaster. Real happiness is not the feeling we get from being entertained or making people do what we want. Genuine happiness is a profound and lasting sense of peace and fulfillment that deeply satisfies and enlarges the soul. It doesn’t go away when circumstances get difficult. It survives and even grows through hardship and struggle. True happiness can only be obtained as we find Real Love and share it with others.

The Story of the Wart King and the Wise Man

In chapter three of his book, Baer tells the story of the Wart King and the Wise Man. He introduces the story in this way:

If most of us have never experienced either giving or receiving Real Love, how do we learn to recognize it and begin to make the choices that will bring it into our lives?

This can happen for all of us, and the following story will help to explain how.

Once there was a rich and beautiful kingdom that stretched beyond the horizon in all directions. But the prince of that kingdom was very unhappy. He had warts all over his face, and everywhere he went, people teased him and laughed at him. So he mostly stayed in his room, alone and miserable.

Upon the death of his father, the prince became king and issued a decree that no one—on pain of death—would ever laugh at his warts again. But still he stayed in his room, ashamed and alone. On the rare occasions that he did go out, he put a cloth bag over his head, which covered his warts but also made it difficult for him to see.

Finally after many years, the king heard about a Wise Man living on top of a nearby mountain. Hoping the Wise Man could help him, the king climbed the mountain and found the old man sitting under a tree. Taking the bag off his head, the king said, “I’ve come for your help.”

The Wise Man looked intently at the king for several long moments and finally said, “You have warts on your face.”

The king was enraged. That was not what he’d climbed all the way to hear. “No, I don’t,” he screamed. Ashamed and angry, he put the bag back over his head.

“Yes, you do,” the Wise Man insisted gently.

“I’ll have you killed!” shouted the king.

“Then call your guards,” the Wise Man said.

“My guards aren’t here!” the king shrieked helplessly. “I climbed all the way up this mountain to ask for your help, and all you can say is that I have warts on my face?! How cruel you are!”

Angry and frustrated, the king ran from the Wise Man, falling repeatedly because he couldn’t see very well with the bag on his head. Finally, the king fell down a steep slope and into a lake, where he began to drown. The Wise Man jumped in, pulled the king to shore, and took the bag from his head so he could breathe.

The king was horrified when he saw the Wise Man staring at him. “You’re laughing at me,” the king said.

“Not at all,” the Wise Man replied, smiling.

With his eyes fixed on the ground, the king said, “The boys in the village laughed at me, and my father was ashamed of me.”

“I’m not one of the boys in the village,” the Wise Man immediately responded, “and I’m not your father. That must have been hard for you.”

“Yes, it was,” the king admitted, with tears in his eyes.

“But as you can see, I’m not laughing at you, and I’m not ashamed of you,” the Wise Man repeated.

Somehow being with the Wise Man did feel different to the king. He looked into the lake and saw his reflection. “I really do have a lot of warts.”

“I know,” the Wise Man agreed.

“And you don’t find them disgusting?”

“No, and I don’t find my own warts disgusting anymore, either.”

The king noticed for the first time that the Wise Man also had warts. “Why do you not wear a bag over your head?”

“I used to,” the old man replied, “but with the bag over my head, I couldn’t see. And I was lonely. So I took it off.”

“Didn’t people laugh at you?” asked the king.

“Oh, sure, some did. And I hated that, just as you do. But gradually I found a few people who didn’t laugh, and that made me very happy.”

The king was thrilled. No one had ever looked at his warts without laughing at him or showing their disgust. “I think I won’t wear the bag when you’re around.”

The Wise Man smiled. “When you go home, you might even leave the bag here.”

“Will I find other people like you, who won’t think I’m disgusting?” the king wondered aloud.

The Wise Man nodded. “Of course you will. And with the love of those people, you won’t care when other people laugh.”

The king dropped the bag on the ground and went back to his kingdom, which was far more beautiful without the bag over his head. And he did find people who didn’t mind his warts at all. For the first time in his life, he was very happy.

(Baer rightfully points out in other parts of his book that the key to genuine self-acceptance is our willingness to share our true self, warts and all with at least one other human being. Without such sharing life will be very lonely.)

Like the Wart King, most of us have learned from experience that people express their affection far less when they see our many mistakes and flaws, especially the ones that inconvenience them. So we lie by hiding our flaws, which enables us to avoid criticism; but doing that also makes it impossible for people to see who we really are. By hiding under the bags we’ve put on our heads, and using our other Getting and Protecting Behaviors, we briefly feel safer and “happier,” but these behaviors actually keep us alone and prevent us from recognizing Real Love even when it’s being given.

Remember that Real Love is always a gift freely given and freely received. It’s Real Love when someone cares about your happiness with no thought for what he or she might get in return. It’s a genuine caring that cannot be bought, traded, manipulated, or forced. When we do anything to get people to like us (Getting Behaviors) or to hurt us less (Protecting Behaviors), we cannot feel that what we receive is being freely offered, and so we can only experience it as Imitation Love—(subject of chapter two) even in those rare instances when we’re actually being offered Real Love, despite our manipulation.

Imagine this scenario” You look out your window and see a man walking toward your house carrying a bushel of apples. You want some of those apples, so you hurry outside and say, “I haven’t had a bite to eat all day, and no one will give me anything.” The first statement is a lie and the second presents you as a victim.

The man with the apples starts to say something, but you don’t wait to hear what it is. Instead, you rush on, verbally attacking him and making him feel guilty. “I hope you remember all the things I’ve done for you in the past.”

The man then give you the apples, but what you don’t know is that he’d actually picked them specifically from his orchard to give to you as a gift. The apples may taste good, but they can’t make you feel loved, because you know that you manipulated the man into giving them to you.

Real Love can only be felt when it’s freely offered and received. Although the man offered his gift freely (Real Love), you did not receive it freely. In effect, you bought the apples with your behavior—by lying, acting like a victim, and attacking—just as if you’d paid for them with money. And because of what you did, whatever the man gave you could not feel like a gift. If you’d only allowed him to offer the apples without your doing or saying anything beforehand, your feelings about his gift would have been entirely different. You would have felt his unconditional concern for you. You’ve transformed any

possibility of Real Love into Imitation Love, like turning gold into lead—a most unproductive reverse alchemy. This is what happens whenever we do anything to manipulate another person into giving us something we think we want, such as praise, attention, approval, and sex. Whatever we receive will always feel purchased and less worthwhile, even if it was freely offered.

The danger in this is that, if we don't learn to distinguish between the two, we can easily be satisfied by the deceptive pleasures of Imitation Love, which might utterly prevent us from finding the Real Love that makes life worth living. That is the real danger of Imitation Love, that it seductively leads us away from the true source of happiness.

Challenging Words

On page 66, Baer says some things that many, if not most or all of us will struggle with or disagree with. He writes:

If you're unhappy in a relationship, you're always wrong. If you can remember that sentence, it will change your life. When you're unhappy, it means that you haven't yet done enough to feel unconditionally loved and loving. That doesn't make your partner right; it just means that your happiness is always in your own hands. You need to focus your attention entirely on what you can do to become more loved and loving, because that's what will make the greatest difference in your relationship and in your happiness, not what you do to change your partner. As long as we focus on being right—by which I don't mean choosing the correct thing to do, but insisting on the appearance of being correct while making our partners appear to be wrong—we waste our time, effort, and chance for happiness. This is not a wise choice.

For many of us, it's helpful to understand that being wrong doesn't make us bad. It's just the critical first step in telling the truth and finding Real Love in relationships. Some people seem to find it impossible to admit being wrong. Being right is a protective habit they will not give up. But such people aren't bad, they're just afraid and angry. They've become so familiar with Getting and Protecting Behaviors—being right is a combination of lying and attacking—that they're terrified to do anything different. These people need to understand that, even though their emptiness began in childhood, through no fault of their own, what they do about it now is their responsibility. We are all responsible for the next step we take in our lives.

To those of you who can't seem to stop being right, I suggest this: When you're unhappy, something is obviously not working. You may be partly right about a particular situation, but so what!" Would you rather be right or happy? The only worthwhile goal in life is to find joy. Therefore, if what you're doing isn't giving you true joy, change it, even if you can find some tiny thing you're doing that's blameless. Being right is worthless. Being happy is everything.

The Story of Lewis and Ray

Baer writes:

Our friends give us wonderful opportunities to make choices and learn how to love each other unconditionally.

Lewis and Ray lived an hour apart, and for years they'd been meeting every Wednesday for dinner. Because Ray didn't like to drive, they usually picked a spot closer to his house. But Lewis didn't really like the fact that he had to do most of the driving, and he complained about it to a wise friend. "It's not fair," said Lewis. "We always do whatever is convenient for Ray, and I'm tired of doing all the driving."

The wise man smiled. "A relationship is the natural result of people making independent choices. This relationship will work only if you allow Ray to make his own choice; then you can make yours."

"But I do all the driving," said Lewis, "and I think—"

The wise man interrupted. "You're describing what you want. Ray has chosen to drive less than you do, and he gets to make that choice. Now, what do you choose to do?"

"But it's not fair—"

"Irrelevant," the wise man interrupted again. "You can only make your own choice. So far, you've chosen to do most of the driving. But you've also chosen to resent Ray and try to change him, and that's what's making you unhappy, not what Ray is doing."

If you are seeking to improve the quality of your love life and relationships but discover what steals your joy, you may want to check out Greg Baer's book.

Have a Loving Week,

