

I called my credit card company last week because I received a statement that I didn't understand. I had closed out our card, but the statement said that I owed \$131 dollars. So I called the number and of course got the automated system. "Welcome to Visa. Please press 1 for billing inquiries, press 2 for dividend miles information, and press 3 for assistance." I needed assistance so I pressed 3. The automated voice replied, "Thank you, please hold for our next relationship manager."

Relationship manager! And sure enough a minute later my relationship manager was on the line. "Hello, my name is John and I'll be your relationship manager today. How may I help you?" I wanted to say, "You're my relationship manager? Great! I've got all kinds of unmanageable relationships that need to be managed. There are the friends that we've parted ways with and my mean neighbors up the street. And that's just the start, John! How soon can you get here?"

John was actually a very good relationship manager because he explained to me that I did not owe Visa \$131 dollars; in fact, Visa owed me that amount. My relationship manager said, "Let me verify your address and I'll put a check in the mail to you today." That's the kind of relationship manager everybody needs. If only life were that easy. If only real relationships could be managed as quickly and efficiently!

Jesus talks relationships in the gospel reading today. He talks about unity – being "one" – that we "all may be one." How does this happen in a world of disunity and strife? There is in fact a way to not just manage but sustain all of our relationships in this life. The bible talks about it all the time and Jesus talks about it today. You know I'm talking about love. Jesus prays for his disciples, saying "*I made known to them your name...that the love with which you have loved me may be in them, and I in them.*" Jesus prays that we all may be one – his disciples and those who will believe through their word. And he says that the key to our unity is love, the ultimate relationship manager.

So, you know that I am talking about love and you also know from your own experience that loving others is neither easy nor efficient. But love is essential. Its absence devastates a person. Here are a couple of real life examples.

A wife who is not loved by her husband turns into someone who is desperate. A husband is supposed to love his wife as Christ loved the church. That means he is supposed to lay down his life for his wife, put her needs ahead of his own, always be thinking about how he can encourage and support and cherish her. When this doesn't happen, when he tends to his own needs and expects his wife to do the same, a wife shrivels up. Often she will seek from her children the love that should

be given to her by her husband. This is so wrong; it wrecks the children by asking of them what they were never meant to give.

Just a little aside here, that is illustrative of how we husbands fail to love our wives and how difficult it is to put our own agendas aside. I was working on this part of the sermon Thursday morning – husbands loving their wives by putting their wives’ agendas before their own – when Christie asked if I could take 20 minutes and help her return a mattress to a friend. I said – “Not now! I’m working on my sermon!” I then saw the ridiculous irony of the situation, so I had no choice but to load up the mattress and go.

Another real life example of the absence of love plays out in children who are not really loved by their parents. That child carries a wound for life. Usually the child – whether 5 or 55 – harbors an anger that expresses itself in a variety of ways: quick temper, passive aggressive behavior, or depression. The unloved child – the one that was meant to be loved and protected, the one in whom both father and mother are meant to delight – will carry the hurt that is the absence of love all through life.

Usually he or she will seek to fill that void in all the wrong ways from all the wrong places. He will need constant approval from other people. She will go from man to man looking for what her father did not give her. He will continue to believe that money and a so-called successful career will fill the void.

It’s Commencement Address Season. Most addresses are filled with the same empty cliché’s. It’s rare to find a good one. But I came across a great one by the writer Anne Lamott, who spoke a few years ago at Berkeley. She writes about the void that I believe comes from the absence of being loved.

“I got a lot of things that society had promised would make me whole and fulfilled -- all the things that the culture tells you from preschool on will quiet the throbbing anxiety inside you -- stature, the respect of colleagues, maybe even a kind of low-grade fame. The culture says these things will save you, as long as you also manage to keep your weight down. But the culture lies... I'd been wanting to be a successful author my whole life. But when I finally did it, I was like a greyhound catching the mechanical rabbit she'd been chasing all her life -- metal, wrapped up in cloth. It wasn't alive; it had no spirit. It was fake. Fake doesn't feed anything. Only spirit feeds spirit, in the same way only your own blood type can sustain you. It had nothing that could slake the lifelong thirst I had for a little immediacy, and connection.”

Fake doesn’t feed anything. Only spirit feeds spirit. And the Bible says that God is Spirit and that God is Love. Particularly, today, Jesus prays that *“the love with which you (the Father) have loved me may be in them.”*

God’s love is the love that we desperately need, because as I’ve already said to my own chagrin, husbands fail. And parents fail. We all fail to love perfectly and we all live with the strife and conflict that results. And most of us spend an inordinate

amount of time chasing the mechanical rabbit, believing the lies of the culture. But we know that fake doesn't feed anything. You need real love. I need real love. We crave it.

What we crave is God's love in the form of grace. We crave the love that comes despite our failing. We crave that kind of love from others. As Shakespeare says in Richard III *"O momentary grace of mortal men, which we more hunt for than the grace of God."* When the momentary love in the form of grace comes from mortal men and women, it is balm to souls. But Shakespeare is right: it is momentary. It is real, not like the mechanical rabbit, but it is fleeting.

So what I want to say to you and myself this morning is only God Himself can and does give you the love you crave and the love you need. Only God Himself gives you the love you need in order to love others, in order that we may be made one.

So what do we do in the absence of this love, when the love is momentary in life? Or what do we do when we don't feel or know or believe God's love for us? I think the fact that this morning's gospel reading is in the form of a prayer is really helpful. I wish I could give you a quick and easy 10 steps to healing, or 5 ways to love your alienating neighbor, or 1 big giant conversion to a life of love. It just doesn't work that way, despite the number of books you'll find in the secular and Christian bookstores.

Love in the form of grace is messy. Philip Yancey tells the story of a minister battling with his 15 year old daughter who was using birth-control and staying out all night. They had tried all forms of punishment and consequence with no avail. The daughter blamed her behavior on her parents, saying that they were too strict.

The minister recalls, *"I remember standing before the plate-glass window in my living room, staring out into the darkness, waiting for her to come home. I felt such rage. I wanted to be like the father of the Prodigal Son, yet I was furious with my daughter for the way she would manipulate us and twist the knife to hurt us. And yet I must tell you, when my daughter came home the next morning, I wanted nothing in the world so much as to take her in my arms, to love her, to tell her I wanted the best for her. I was a helpless, lovesick father."*

I do believe that God's love in the form of grace does change everything; His love for you is the only thing that can change everything. His love can help heal the places you have not been loved. His love can cause you to even love the people who have hurt you. His love, as the prayer today says, can bring about unity where there is division, concord where there is strife, unity where there is division.

But I also know that in many cases, a change of heart comes slowly. So we are left where Jesus is today - in prayer. God please give us the love that we need to love one another. God, please show us, make us feel that we are loved just as you have loved your Son. Make your Spirit feed our spirits. Amen.

