

# What does love look like...

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Acts 2<sup>42-47</sup> / John 13<sup>31-33</sup> /

‘Teach me the definition of true love...’ The world is desperate for love... it’s looking for love. It is looking in every place it thinks it can find it and even in places it suspects it can’t find it – but it looks there... just in case! And it’s looking because deep down it understands something we should all be aware of, something that unites every man, woman and child who ever lived on this planet; something which the Bible makes clear from start to finish – **we were made for love**. We are **‘creatures of love.’** We have been superbly equipped for love and, given the opportunity and further training we can become better and better **‘lovers’** as we grow older.

And Jesus makes it clear that this is the case when He summarises the whole OT in these words...

**“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.’<sup>38</sup>This is the greatest and first commandment.<sup>39</sup>And a second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbour as yourself.’<sup>40</sup>On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.” (Matt 22)**

The world is desperate to find love. And not just any love. The world wants a love it was born for – the love of God; the love that **reveals** God. And to help the world discover that love God has given... the Church! Yes friends, He has given the world the Church.

And He has given the Church because the first question that the world asks about love is... **‘What does it look like?’** Show me love. Show me how to love. Let me know what love feels like. These are the constant questions of the world and it is the Church’s calling to be the answer to those questions; to display in both its own internal life and in the way it relates to the world the love of God. And this very practical task, this very simple task is what we’re about as a church. The world longs to see **‘love in action,’ ‘love displayed.’** So what does love look like.

It is my contention that in the record of the first Church in Acts we have in very clear form the answer to this question. And it is summed up by the use of a very common word. I wonder if you can pick it up.

Yes, the word **‘together’** or more correctly **‘altogether.’** In Greek this looks like this... ἐπὶ τὸ αὐτὸ. This term occurs twice in the gospels, 3 times in the epistles but 5 times in Acts and all within the first 4 chapters where the character of the Church is laid out. Various commentators say that this particular phrase became a kind of code word or catch phrase for the church both

in the NT and in the early church writers. We do this sort of thing a lot these days, especially with sports teams. The 'Black Caps,' the 'Black Sticks,' the 'Tall Blacks,' the 'All Blacks.' These names sum up very quickly who we're referring to and what they're about. And so it seems for the early church this phrase 'ἐπὶ τὸ αὐτὸ' summed up the heart of the Church's life. **'Altogether.'** Why? Because this is what it looked like. This is what was most apparent. This is what the Church **produced!** And we should add at this point that this was precisely what Jesus prayed for near the end of His life when He was bringing His disciples and the church before God in what is known as the Great High priestly prayer...

**<sup>9</sup>I am asking on their behalf; I am not asking on behalf of the world, but on behalf of those whom you gave me, because they are yours. <sup>10</sup>All mine are yours, and yours are mine; and I have been glorified in them. <sup>11</sup>And now I am no longer in the world, but they are in the world, and I am coming to you. Holy Father, protect them in your name that you have given me, so that they may be one, as we are one. (John 17)**

Why would Jesus pray this? Why did He want the Church to be 'one?' Just 11 verses later He gives us the answer...

**<sup>22</sup>The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one, <sup>23</sup>I in them and you in me, that they may become completely one, so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me. (John 17)**

So here we have both the call and the vision of the Church universal. The call is to **'love one another as I have loved you...'** and the practical outworking of that call comes in this word **'altogether.'** Jesus says 'This is what my Church will look like when it is operating as it should do. It will look unified, it will look **'altogether.'** And finally later in that chapter we have Jesus explaining why that is so important... **'so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.'** The world will know love and it will know it is loved when? When we live as one, when we live **'altogether.'**

Do we realise what a hard word this is? Do we realise how seldom we are able to do this well? Even at our passionate best as human beings, when everything in our physiology, our emotions, our desires is assembled in our favour we still struggle to really **stay together.** Marriage is a classic example. The fact of the matter is that 100% of human beings find marriage difficult. Doesn't matter how in love we were when we got married, how motivated we were, how full of desire we were – the journey of marriage tests every couple severely. And we in the church cannot crow about our success here. We have not done well in the marriage stakes in the west. Staying **altogether** is just not easy despite marriage almost universally being honoured within the Church and to a lesser extent, society.

And this is to say nothing of our struggles to stay at least friendly towards other denominations or other Christians. Even we need to know what love looks like and it appears that for the new Church in Acts it begins with this expression **'ἐπὶ τὸ αὐτὸ'** – altogether. And this **'altogether'**

produces something quite incredible. It produces, firstly, a completely different kind of attitude towards possessions – in other words it affects our pockets.

**and had all things in common;<sup>45</sup> they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need.**

Love is not defined by material things rather it defines how we use the material things in our life. People will know we are a loving body when we place the material things we have into God's service. This is quite a challenge to us because materialism can provide us with so many good feelings that it is easy for us to become addicted to 'things.'

Secondly, love led them to spend time together in a variety of contexts; worship, mealtimes, mission, work.

**<sup>46</sup>Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts,<sup>47</sup> praising God and having the goodwill of all the people.**

Time spent together allows us to really deal with one another, to get to know the other and, in many ways to get to know ourselves. We live at such a pace these days that we are slowly losing the skill of simply being with each other. And this is almost as important as being with God because it's when we're with another that we begin to run up against the things in our life which are not right with God. God uses us to reveal Himself to each other. Jesus called us 'Sons of God' and we are so because the nature of God is put within us by the work of the Holy Spirit. If that nature is within us then it is the case that we will be used to reveal God to each other. As the proverb goes, '<sup>17</sup>As iron sharpens iron, so one person sharpens another.' (Prov 27)

And not only does love lead us to spend time with others it also changes the basis for our reason to spend time with others. Once we were led simply by our likes and dislikes – I like this person and I don't like that person. I want to be with this person and I don't want to be with that person. Love does not look like this! Love does not distinguish between people based on something as fleeting and as unreliable as our base tastes. When the Holy Spirit comes upon us we discover that God is calling us to love in a much more inclusive way – to love, as it were, **the unlovely**.

But Richard, I don't see this capacity within me. I have a hard job even loving my husband/wife my children, my so called friends – let alone those who I don't know well or like! How can I love like this? it is only the work of God's Spirit within us that can lead us to love as God calls us to. One of the great mistakes we make in the Christian Church is to imagine that we can achieve what God calls us to – **in our own strength... by trying a little harder**. Faith never works this way. Faith starts by taking us out of ourselves to God and the key to sustaining faith is not to look once again back to ourselves! The key to the how of love is relationship with God but I will say more about this next time.

God is calling us as a Church to move beyond ourselves when it comes to love – to love not as we **can love** but to love as we **have been loved**. To love in a manner which consistently holds up the eternal love of Christ and which consistently honours the love God has displayed for all of us on the Cross. When we love like this we truly become the Sons and Daughters of God we were intended to be. When we love like this the world begins to see what true love is.

But let me finish with this wonderful little picture of the kind of love I am talking about. It concerns a young wife who has had to have a cancerous tumour removed from her face. This operation has left her with significant disfigurement and the surgeon watches as she sees her for the first time...

I stand by the bed where a young woman lies, her face postoperative, her mouth twisted in palsy, clownish. A tiny twig of the facial nerve, the one to the muscles of her mouth, has been severed. She will be this way from now on. In cutting her face the surgeon had followed with religious fervour the curve of her flesh; I promise you that. Nevertheless, to remove the tumour in her cheek, **I had to cut the little nerve**. Her young husband is in the room. He stands on the opposite side of the bed and together they seem to dwell in the evening lamplight, isolated from me, private. Who are they, I ask myself, he and this wry mouth I have made, who gaze at and touch each other so generously, greedily? The young woman speaks. "Will my mouth always be like this?" she asks. "Yes," I say, "it will. It is because the nerve was cut." She nods and is silent. But the young man smiles. "I like it," he says, "It is kind of cute." All at once I know who he is. I understand and I lower my gaze. One is not bold in an encounter with a god. Unmindful, he bends to kiss her crooked mouth and I am so close I can see how he twists his own lips to accommodate to hers, to show her that their kiss still works.

The world longs for that kiss. It longs to know that despite its terrible disfigurement it is still loved and God longs for it to know that too. We who are the Church, we are those sent to give the kiss...