

THE ONE THING NECESSARY

**The Transforming Power
of Christian Love**

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acta
PUBLICATIONS

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INTRODUCTION

At a critical point in his life, Jesus gave to each of us an extraordinary challenge: “A new commandment I give to you, that you also love one another; even as I have loved you, that you also love one another. By this all...will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another” (John 13:34-35). Nowadays, we live in a world that is filled with indifference, prejudice, and hatred, and Jesus’ hope that Christians would become a prophetic presence of transforming love is more needed than ever. Jesus has called each of us to believe in the power of love, and to let this love motivate us in all we do.

The first reason we believe in love is because each of us has personally experienced God’s love toward us. A faith-filled experience of God’s love changes our lives, showing us what God has done and continues to do for us and how we ought to respond by modeling our lives on God’s love. Living our faith in love is a spiritual journey of discovery, a pilgrimage in which each of us gains a deeper knowledge of God’s self-communication to us. It clarifies our relationship to God, the meaning of life, and what our own response to God ought to be. Spiritual writers frequently describe our spiritual journey as a journey of faith. However, the way of faith is simply a preparation for the way of love, and this book challenges all of us to focus our entire lives on the essential call to believe in the power of love.

We all yearn to know the meaning of life, our place in the universe, and the purpose of our existence. What we are really yearning for is love; for this alone satisfies our restlessness. We value love when we see it, we long for it when it is not present, we know it seems to manifest what is the best in us.

We need to acknowledge that love is the central experience that gives meaning to our lives. Why should this be so? I think we value love so much because God has made us this way. God is love and has placed a seed of divine life in each of us. The Trinity is a relationship of love that is dynamic and ever extending itself. Creation is a reaching out of a loving God to increase love through others. Creation is a project of love.

The early Christian disciples were overwhelmed by the emphasis on love in Jesus' extraordinary teachings. They were convinced that love is the kernel of the Christian revelation. However, when we look at our contemporary world this central message of Christianity has never been more needed—or more forgotten—than it is now. This is a time when we Christians can have a prophetic impact on our world by proclaiming the transformational power of love. By our lack of love we frequently turn the world into a kingdom of darkness, sin, and hate, which flows from a failure to love. Hardheartedness, prejudice, bigotry, and hatred are increasing everywhere, and those of us dedicated to God must take note lest we lose the battle for the direction of this world. The hate-filled of this world are far better organized than we who seek a reign of love.

We Christians need to renew our commitment to the essentials of love. We must live our lives based on the decision to love and an asceticism that stresses love alone. Perhaps only a few of us will initially accept the challenge of this renewal of our faith in love, but the power of Christian love will percolate up through every level of community interaction until it affects the larger communal expressions of civic and ecclesial life. Our goal is to become channels of divine love. This is the only way to renew ourselves, our Church, and the world. This is our new destiny, and the only way we will find meaning in life.

Jesus told Martha that only one thing is necessary (see Luke 10:41-42). That one thing is love. This book is a call for us to leave aside the many secondary aspects of Christianity and focus our dedication on the single issue that is clearly more important than any other...and than all others put together.

If Christians are to be the leavening presence in the world for which Jesus hoped and prayed, then we must redirect all our lives to focus on the way of love. Let us direct our entire commitment on the call to love. Where needed, let us even revise our ideas on what it even means to be a Christian.

Love's Call

FINDING MEANING IN GOD'S LOVE

I gave him intellect so that he could recognize and understand my will in the wisdom of my Son; for it is I who am the source of all graces, and I burn with a father's love. I also gave him his will to love, letting him share in the love of the Holy Spirit so that he could love whatever his intellect had seen and recognized.

Catherine of Siena, *On Divine Providence*

Help us on this day of rest to see goodness in all your creatures; open our eyes and our hearts to your love in the world.

Psalter, Week 2, Sunday, "Morning Prayer," Intercessions

Late have I loved you, O Beauty so ancient and so new; late have I loved you! For behold you were within me, and I outside; and I sought you outside and in my ugliness fell upon those lovely things that you have made. You were with me and I was not with you. I was kept from you by those things, yet had they not been in you, they would not have been at all. You called and cried to me and broke open my deafness...you touched me, and I have burned for your peace.

Augustine of Hippo, *Confessions, Book 7*

Love alone can unify living beings so as to complete and fulfill them, for it alone joins them by what is deepest in themselves. All we need is to imagine our ability to love developing until it embraces the totality of the people of the Earth.

Teilhard de Chardin, "Meditation"

FOCUS FOR THIS CHAPTER

***We human beings are restless and unfulfilled
until we rest in God's love.***

- *Savor the restlessness we often feel in our search for the meaning of our life.*
- *Answer Jesus' question, "What are you looking for?"*
- *Think about our ordinary and extraordinary experiences of human love and what they tell us about God's love for us.*
- *Explore the spirituality of love.*
- *Reflect on how we come to know God and what God wants for us.*

When I attended high school, many years ago, the motto of the school was *Sicut Cervus* (“as a deer”). These are the first two words of Psalm 42, and they describe a Levite’s longing to experience God. These words, and the group of nine psalms (40-49) of which they are a part, present a wonderful image of a believer’s search for answers to the most important questions of life’s meaning, purpose, and end.

*As a deer longs for flowing streams,
so my soul longs for you, O God.
My soul thirsts for God,
for the living God.
When shall I come and behold
The face of God?*

Psalm 42:1-2

This psalm certainly portrays a believer’s longing to understand and experience God, but it is actually a lament, rather than a joyful assurance of answers, to the yearnings the psalmist feels. In fact, he says later in the psalm, “tears have been my food.” People taunt him with the criticism, “Where is your God?” He says his soul is cast down and disquieted, and he even turns to God with the cry, “Why have you forgotten me?” So, he goes about mournfully, oppressed by some and taunted by others.

This block of nine psalms presents the persevering faith of all believers and our longing to be near God—in spite of daily issues that pull us away from this commitment and in spite of the ridicule of others who claim the search itself is a waste of time. The psalmist knows that our search for fulfillment in life is satisfied only in our real experience of God.



The Fathers of the Church described a human being as “a spiritual person” (*homo spiritualis*), and also as “capable of God” (*capax Dei*). We are, as far as we know, the only creatures capable of seeking our

own fulfillment and thinking about ultimate values. Our primary tasks as human beings are not merely to survive or procreate but to seek meaning and value in life and, even more, to catch glimpses of who and how God is for us. This yearning is a noble vocation of all humans. It is something within us but greater than we are, a call we simply cannot ignore.

In fact, we cannot get away from it. As Saint Augustine concluded, “Our hearts are restless until they rest in God” (*Confessions, Book 7*). This longing for God is not something abstract, for we are always longing to understand who God is in relation to our own humanity. It is really a yearning to understand the meaning of life itself, a form of longing for self-understanding and self-fulfillment.

All of us in our own way have responded to this call for meaning and fulfillment in the many experiences of life: in high school, college, or university; in relationships, such as friendship, dating, marriage, and family life; in work or in ministry; in organizations and institutions, both civic and ecclesiastical. These profound experiences, lived with dedication and fidelity, bring us closer to God. They give us nothing more than a taste of divinity and then leave us dissatisfied.

Because of the many obstacles to meaning we encounter in our daily life, our search is often as fruitless as the psalmist’s, whom we join in a shared lament. Our soul is cast down within us, we journey helplessly, feeling at times forgotten and cast aside, derided and scorned in our pursuit, a laughingstock among the peoples, and covered with a deep darkness (see Psalm 42-49).

I personally find that our times are often as sad to live in as were the psalmist’s. Our world seems often to work against our efforts to both understand and experience the divine life that we somehow know is there at all times. Our search for personal fulfillment is essential to the quality of our life, yet it often appears just beyond our grasp.

Yet while the search for God is not easy, it is the daily expression of our hope and the only way to satisfy our deepest yearnings as human beings. And here is the good news: Our successful search for fulfillment lies merely in our open and genuine response to God’s ongoing call to experience God’s love. Our ultimate meaning is only a love away, and that love is freely available at all times to all people.



In John's Gospel, Jesus appears on the scene and disciples make religious proclamations to one another about him. Jesus does not say anything until later, and then the first words he utters to his disciples speak to us as well: "What are you looking for?" (John 1:38). Our response to that question is a lifelong journey to discover who God is for us.

But how is that yearning going to be satisfied today? I say it is with whatever aids are available, new and old. It may be through the Church or other faiths; it may be through books or films or on the Internet; it could be a song or a sunrise, a birth or a death, something ordinary or extraordinary.

Whatever means we use, we must continue to look at our lives and penetrate to the center of our very existence to find both our true selves and a call to a deeper relationship with God. Our journey to God, to fulfillment, and to union in love is a struggle, as Saint Paul pointed out to the Athenians: God gives all people opportunities "so that they would search for God and perhaps grope for him and find him—though indeed he is not far from each one of us. For 'In him we live and move and have our being'" (Acts 17:27-28). This journey to God requires vision, motivation, often a guide, and the helpful experiences of travelers who have preceded or accompany us.

This is a journey to become the best people we are capable of being. In a world where we modern men and women have mastered everything except ourselves and our own purpose in life, this journey is for those of us who are no longer satisfied with the childish beliefs of the past but yearn to be fully human in our relationship to others and to God. We want to react to the depersonalizing of modern life, to what we see as a diminished sense of the human vocation.



We also want an adult relationship with God. As St. Paul pointed out to the Corinthians, “When I was a child I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child; when I became an adult, I put an end to childish ways. For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been known” (1 Corinthians 13:8-13).

This journey to discover God’s ways in our life is an experience that impacts, convinces, and transforms us. It is the courageous journey of grasping our own uniqueness and of pursuing the ultimate meaning of human existence. This journey teaches us that we become more fully human the more we become co-travelers with one another and with a loving God, immersed in God’s purpose and grace. This is our destiny and mission in life.

Disciples who undertake this uncommon journey are people who hope and long to become something they are not yet. Such “true” disciples are visionaries, striving for a greater understanding of the purpose of human existence and of God’s call. This is a journey for those of us who have found our own emptiness, for it is on a road that can only be followed after we have already lost our way while searching in other directions.

Once begun, this journey has a power and a force all its own, an internal dynamism that keeps us going and focused on values that enthuse and continue to motivate us. Our journey to self-understanding and to a greater experience of God’s love begins with simple questions. Why are we the way we are? Why is our world the way it is? Why do we long for something we never seem to attain? What makes us proud of our humanity or ashamed of our humanity?



As we journey, we find the generosity and goodness of many people impress us very positively. In fact, we quickly realize that the people we admire most are those who are known for their love, not their wealth or their skill or their power. It is not that we do not appreciate greatness, creativity, and artistic brilliance, but love is different. Why is it that we humans appreciate love so much when we give or receive it? Is it

because love is a manifestation of what is deepest within us, most like what we know we need to be?

Is it not true that we find humans without love to be stunted in their maturing? Failure to love is an abuse that creates a humanity that needs healing (or in Christian terms, redemption). The good news is that on our journey toward meaning and fulfillment love will have a pre-eminent role. The journey to God is an expression of our poverty of spirit that opens us to the love that brings fulfillment.

As Christians, our journey to our fulfillment as human beings is a journey to a deeper understanding of the centrality of love in our lives. Christian spirituality, then, is our search for this love and our way of striving for a greater share in God's existence. Our spirituality is rooted in a faith experience but brings that faith to birth in the ever-changing circumstances of modern life. Our pursuit of this goal of making love the central feature of our spirituality must permeate every aspect of life.

Christian spirituality today stresses the inner journey to self-discovery. Deep within each one of us there is a zone that is naturally divine, where we encounter ourselves searching for love and in the process encounter the God of Love searching for us. Thus, spirituality gives meaning to our very existence.



We can try to build our spirituality on other people's ideas and teachings and these can help motivate us for a while, but eventually there has to be a personal experience that motivates all that we do. The former is a belief system; the latter is a faith-filled experience that is simple, intuitive, passive, indescribable, and transforming. Belief is an articulation, an explanation of our faith. Beliefs change, however, and ought to, as our cultural and historical circumstances change. Faith, on the other hand, is a constant. Those of us with real faith know we have experienced something that has changed everything and that our life can never be the same again. We have caught a glimpse of the meaning of life, at least for ourselves.

This faith-filled experience could be the moment we first discover

that we are loved; or when we feel the unconditional dedication of another; or when we realize that some friendships endure for a lifetime, even though they are not always the ones we thought would. It could be the existential moment when we become aware of our own perennial inclination to sin; or a time when everything we previously valued is lost or taken away. It could be in the awareness of our own need to continually struggle for something that is not yet within our reach or the moment when we personally appropriated the vision of our religious tradition.

To use a phrase from another context, a genuine faith-filled experience is a dangerous memory, because when we think back to it we must confront the fact that the experience changed everything about us and that we can never be the same again. This is frightening, because if we do not change as a result of our faith-filled experience, we know it will be the greatest betrayal of our life, one that would silence love, goodness, and hope in our life forever.

Generally, those of us who have had a profound spiritual experience such as this can remember exactly where we were at the time, what we were doing, and all the details of the moment. With this experience comes an awareness of its importance in our life: “Guard the good treasure entrusted to you, with the help of the Holy Spirit living in us” (2 Timothy 1:14).



This faith-filled experience is always an experience of the otherness of God. It is not simply an indication about humanity's goodness without God. Rather, it is a glimpse of a transcendent being that is healing, loving, and unifying. The good news is that in the midst of the turmoil of this world, love still breaks through.

In fact, we often talk about “faith” and “truth” when speaking of religion, but for Christians our faith is in the essential truth that love takes priority over all else. Our experience of spirituality is always at once an awesome insight into transcendence and otherness in the midst of our emptiness and helplessness. When considering this experience of love, I am reminded of the words of Kahlil Gibran: “And think

not that you can guide the course of love, for love, if it finds you worthy, will guide your course.” As Christians, our search for fulfillment, our journey to God, our experience of faith, all converge in an appreciation of the centrality of love.

Frequently our experience of transcendent love starts with an ordinary event or encounter that either confirms the value of love or cries out for the healing presence of love. In either case, these simple, intuitive experiences are glimpses into transcendent love. We have faith in this experience, but it is not a simple understanding or explanation that results from our reflection on a particular event. Rather, we know we have touched something that we have never touched before. It is beyond understanding, reflection, and interpretation. We recognize it for what it is: an awareness of reality beyond the normal horizons of our life.

After this, every small gesture or denial of love is only understandable against the backdrop of this transcendent love we have experienced. For example, knowing we are loved unconditionally by someone else only has meaning in the context of God’s unconditional love. Likewise, hatred and unforgiving responses can only be judged in the context of God’s pure love and universal forgiveness. Even in our daily acts of loving or of being loved we witness mystery, and we are at once aware that we “cannot guide the course of love.”



Our Christian spiritual journey is a journey of discovery of the transforming value of love. Our love of God and God’s love for us gives meaning and value to all our other loving. And as we learn to love others, we learn to love ourselves more.

Of course, our human awareness of God is very limited and rarely amounts to more than the awareness of the existence of a mystery beyond normal horizons. Prior to appreciating and experiencing this mystery beyond normal horizons, we have to purify our previous limiting knowledge of God.

Mystics who have caught glimpses of God say that we encounter God through “unknowing” rather than through “knowing.” By this they

give us two reminders. One, we need to get rid of all previous images we may have accumulated about God, because God is not like any of the images we have. Abandoning these images is a form of *unknowing*. Two, we will not gain greater insight into God through the exercise of the intellect (knowing) but only through love-filled faith (unknowing). If the former instructs us that God is nothing like we thought God was, the latter instructs us that God never seems to act towards us in the way we thought God would.

So, our awareness of the mystery of love has two rhythms, one theoretical and the other visceral. Both are part of God's call, felt in our own being, in our yearnings, in our spiritual search, and in our profoundest experiences. The good news is that our God of Love is seeking to reveal in us and to us that this world is created for love and sustained by love and that loving relationships with others and with God are central to our lives. This vision of the importance and power of love is the core of God's call to each and every one of us.



**QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION
FOR PERSONAL REFLECTION**

1. *Describe what you consider your overriding purpose in life.
Where did it come from? How does it relate to love?*

2. *What are three ordinary experiences of love in your life?
Did they reveal to you the transcendent nature of God's love for
you? Explain. How do you react to the idea of a "spirituality of
love"?*

3. *How do you understand the difference between "belief" and "faith"?
Which is more visceral and which more theoretical for you? Why?
Do you encounter God more with "knowing" or "unknowing"?
Give examples.*