

"How do you know if love is real?" That question so haunts us all, that almost every song, every poem, every movie, every dream, shares that theme. Every new relationship grabs us at the center to make us wonder, "Is this love?"

I'm sure it was no different for Jesus. What was different for him is that he was able to keep love at his center. His peaceful sayings today are engulfed with tension: the Pharisees test him. The Sadducees fail to stump him. The government wants to kill him. Lawyers, who in those days were scoundrels, listen to his words like lions for the footsteps of their prey. Yet in the midst of this controversy, Jesus, who never shies away from anger, speaks so lovingly that he demonstrates the very law he quotes: "Love God completely; love your neighbor as yourself." Was his love real? You bet it was.

Sometimes love is not real. For example, we use people; we flatter and lie to get what we want. Sometimes our love is deceitful. Other times our own love deceives us. We tell ourselves we are loving, when actually we are only "in love," infatuated, or co-dependent. We say we're loving another, but in fact we're hurting ourselves. We surrender self-respect, we consume our resources, we cheat our morals, and we call it love, but it's not. Jesus says, "Love your neighbor as yourself," not "in place of yourself."

Love is real when it is no longer a feeling, but a whole way of acting. This is one reason why our church teaches that sexual love belongs in marriage. The sexual act has its greatest meaning when it goes beyond a feeling and becomes part of a whole way of acting with another person. The safest sex of all is protected by a committed relationship--safe not just from disease, but from disrespect. When Jesus says the greatest law is love he asks for a commitment so fundamental that it puts God at the center of all that we do.

Jesus says keep love at the center. Sometimes we put ourselves at the center. We do things that please us ahead of what might please another, even if the other is someone we say we love. Sometimes we keep law at the center. We're so intent on following rules that we won't change even when it would be more loving. The greatest law is love. If love is at our center, real love, then we'll respect others, respect ourselves, and respect the God whose love made us at the beginning.