

Valentine's Day makes February the month of Love, or at least the first half of February is: before all the heart-shaped chocolates and Valentine cards are removed from the store shelves and replaced with chocolate eggs and marshmallow Peeps. Yes, love is in the air. Yet Valentine's Day focuses not on just any love but specifically on romantic love. This is a shame because we certainly could use a lot more love in this world. In the Bible we are called upon to love our neighbors; and the parable of the Good Samaritan illustrates who our neighbors are. Not to delve into the various interpretations of this wonderful parable, but I understand it as an all-encompassing love. I am reminded of the song, "What the World Needs Now Is Love," made popular by Jackie DeShannon in the mid '60s. If you are of a certain age, you might remember the refrain:

What the world needs now is love, sweet love
It's the only thing that there's just too little of

It continues:

What the world needs now is love, sweet love,
No, not just for some but for everyone.

No, not just for some but for everyone. This is an admirable aspiration, but who can do that? It is easy to love our children, our parents, our pets – we definitely love our pets. We also love our friends. What about other people in our community? We can open our hearts to the nice people, but when it comes to the not-so-nice people, the ones who are different from us, it gets more difficult. Then, of course, there are the really annoying people that nobody can stand. To love them is a tall order. So how can we do this?

It might appear daunting, but we can. Opening our hearts doesn't just happen, it takes practice. Like anything difficult and worth doing we need to start small, start with what is easy, and gradually work our way up to the more difficult and finally to the most difficult. Our hearts may be closed to love like a clam shell, but if we can find a crack we can begin to pry it open; and when it is open, it is open to both giving and receiving love and that is truly a gift from Heaven.

How do we find that crack, that little place where love peeks out? We need to find something we love, anything: it can be an object, an activity, a person, an animal. If we have a pet, and we usually love our pets, we can start with this sense of love. If we love sitting at the kitchen table drinking our first cup of coffee in the morning, we can start there. We may love watching the birds at the feeder, or taking a morning walk. There is always at least one thing in our lives that we love.

We can focus on this love and let it grow. We let it grow to what is nearest at hand: to ourselves. We are all worthy of love. We all have our faults, but deep down we all want to be good; and we need to have confidence in that essential goodness within

ourselves. We can look at ourselves in the past and feel love and compassion for the person we once were. Maybe we suffered from an alcoholic parent, or suffered from bullying in school. Maybe we felt unloved, or maybe we still feel unloved. We can look at ourselves as we will someday be, aging or alone, and feel love and compassion for the person we will become. We can look at who we are today, struggling with work and family, or addiction, or sickness, or getting older, and feel love and compassion with who we are today. We all need love and as we open our hearts we begin to be able to offer this love to ourselves.

As we open our hearts we can begin to include those who naturally generate compassion within us: to those who suffer. We open our hearts to those who are sick, those who are abused, those who are tortured by addictions. We open our hearts to them, realizing that there but for the grace of God, go I.

We love our friends, and this love opens our hearts further. We can think of the many good times we have had together, or how we have helped each other when times were tough. How we love their little quirks that make them unique, and how we wish them the best in all their endeavors.

We can now open our hearts to people around us to whom our feelings are neutral. We can open our hearts to people we meet in our daily life. We can open our hearts to the cashier at the grocery store. We can open our hearts to the people we meet while bringing our children to school. We can open our hearts to the other people stopped at a stop light. We can offer them love and compassion, for are they not just like us, trying to make the best of their time here on this Earth?

And so we have developed love for ourselves, for people who are suffering, for our friends, and for those neutral people around us. This is where it starts to get tough – but with our hearts full of love, we forge ahead to open our heart to difficult people, to our enemies. We don't have to open our hearts to all of them at the same time; let us hope there are not too many – but maybe one or two. These are the people that compel us to feel angry, the people we could do without; but they are here and just as deserving of love as everybody else. It helps to realize that we don't know what they have suffered, what deep emotional scars they may carry with them day in and day out. We all have our cross to bear, and some crosses are heavier than others. People are not unpleasant out of joy, they are unpleasant as a result of suffering. If we realize this it helps us to open our hearts to them as well, in the realization that they too are really not so different from us either.

Finally, we try to stretch our love to include all beings, to echo God's love for all creation. To let our love be like pebbles dropped in a quiet pond, whose gentle waves expand into ever-growing circles to eventually splash on distant banks.

If we are to love and be loved, we need to practice love. And as we exercise our hearts our hearts will open and our love will grow. And if we are diligent, then someday our love will grow to be, as the song says, not just for some but for everyone.