

Do you remember the first time you fell in love?

My first crush was in grade 5, Charlie was his name, the older brother of a school girl friend. We sat together on the bus, and he would bring chocolate bars. I'm sure it was my love of chocolate that was the backbone of that relationship! But, seriously for a moment, remember what it was like to first be 'in love'. Thoughts of that person dominated your mind, you planned activities together, and spent as much time as you could together, when you weren't together you longed to be with him or her. The endless phone calls, or now a days, I suppose it's texting or messaging them, and planning the next time you'd be together again. And you couldn't do enough for them! You were head over heels in love, heart and soul it felt like. I've heard people say it's the time of their lives when they felt most alive! Some crushes fizzle out over time—usually when reality hits—or when the chocolate runs out! But others burn even brighter, become real love, and you can't imagine ever being without that person in your life.

And so, you make the commitment, and get married or maybe move in together. After the honeymoon phase, emotions subside somewhat, you truly get comfortable with each other, and the relationship changes. You don't need to be in constant contact to know that the one you love loves you back. Yet when you come together, the chemistry is still there, the passion is still there, your love continues, but in a different way; it has matured. It's at a deeper level. Time rolls on and the one you love is still there, life is busy, kids maybe come along, financial issues may become a problem, balancing all the demands, we get older and life is tiring. We take our loved one's presence, maybe even their love, for granted and then we don't work so hard on our relationship with our chosen loved one, there are so many competing priorities. And the relationship can falter, and if we're not careful, it may even end. Sometimes a life crisis—a serious illness, a death in the family, re-focuses us on the ones we love around us. We reach out to each other, and grow together again. When both members of the relationship are committed to it, the relationship grows stronger, emotionally deeper, we discover new strengths, new ways of knowing each other. It's a nurturing and strengthening love; a truly loving relationship strengthens even through the adversities of life.

And it occurred to me how our relationship with God, with Jesus, can often follow the same pattern as the one with our chosen loved ones. When we first realize the extent of God's deep love for us, that incredible exhilaration of knowing that God loves you-- no matter what we do, is like the rush of first love. When we have the experience of truly confessing and knowing God's forgiven us, and being uplifted by the Holy Spirit is like having wings. Experiencing the comfort of Jesus' love when we're grieving or feeling lost in life, the electric feeling of empowerment when the Holy Spirit envelopes us in her energy. And we know that God our loving Creator, Jesus' forgiving love, Spirit's empowering love is always with us. We've been taught this since we were kids—the presence of the triune God -- Father/Mother, the Son, and the Holy Spirit is always there.

Our lives are so busy. There are so many things to keep balanced, to try and find time for. It's hard to find quality time with our loved ones, and we know they love us, we love them, and there's so many other things that need done, well, spending time on those special relationships--that slides into the back seat.

Same thing can happen to our relationship with God. It can suffer if we don't keep working on it as well. Yes, we know God is always there, so we can take God's presence for granted. And there so many other things to get done on Sunday mornings! Surely God understands how busy we are, how many others are depending on us to get stuff done. Jesus will forgive, that what he does, forgives and understands? Right? So our relationship with God is hit or miss, maybe even mostly a miss some weeks. And our relationship with God falters, that closeness we once felt with Jesus has diminished. It's like we've lost touch with the Holy Spirit, we can't seem to feel God's love. Where is Jesus when we really need him?

I thought God was always supposed to be there? Where is Holy Spirit's empowering grace when I feel like I really need it anyway?

And we blame God, deny God's presence, maybe even stop coming to church at all. We feel bereft, let down, alone, maybe even abandoned.

And sometimes it takes a crisis in our lives for us to really be appreciative of our relationships, with those we love, our spouses, dearest friends and yes, even God. It's when we're in crisis that we're often vulnerable enough, open enough to let God in again, our defenses are down and we let God's presence in, when we're open enough to feel God's grace, God's love for us. Because deep down we know that God loves us, all of us, body and soul, and there is nothing we can do to stop God from loving us. God will always love us. And what does God want from us in return? Our love! And we don't have to wait for a crisis to open our hearts to the Lord. It's like any relationship, it requires time and energy to keep it alive and strong.

Love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength. Judaism's most fundamental, ancient, and most widely recited biblical passage, the Shema:¹ a "text² that always begins worship in the synagogue". This was the answer Jesus gave when the lawyers who were the specialists in the interpretation of the Laws of Moses asked him which commandment was primary. Once again they were challenging him, trying to get him to publically discredit himself. Jesus knows what they're trying and won't fall into their trap. And then he quotes Leviticus, *The second commandment is this: Love your neighbour as yourself. And that there is no commandment greater than these. (Matt 22: 37-40)* That neatly wraps the two together in a complete package of what it means to love. Of all the 600 plus Laws in the Jewish Torah, the book of Laws, to first love God and then one's neighbour are the top 2.

What does that really mean, what does it mean to love God? Well, think for a minute what it means when you deeply love someone, you:

- prioritize your loved one over other people in your life,
- make time to be in relationship with them, which deepens the relationship
- plan times to be together, just you and them
- do things together, even do things for them and often put their needs before your own when that's necessary,
- let them know you care for them by doing special things for them that you wouldn't do for others
- and you probably even tell them that you love them.

So how much different is it to love God, to show God our love?

- Do we prioritize God over everything else in our lives? As the writer of psalm 139 wrote, this is the God who created us, who knows us so well that God knows when we sit down and when we rise up, who discerns our thoughts and is acquainted with our ways, who formed us, who knit us together in our mother's wombs. Prioritizing God means doing our utmost to live in God's ways, to not let the cultural influences of our society over rule what we know is Christ's way. To live as a Christian means to live counter to the culture, counter to society's values. It was so in Jesus' time and still is today.

¹ Tim Beach-Verhey in 'Theological Perspective' in Feasting on the Word, Year A Vol 4 for Matt 22:34-46 p. 212

² Earl F. Palmer in 'Pastoral Perspective' in Feasting on the Word, Year A Vol 4 for Matt 22:34-46 p. 214

- Do we make time to be in relationship with God, to deepen our relationship, with God, with Jesus, with Holy Spirit? Our relationships with those we love deepens with time spent with them, and grows as we learn and understand more about them. Same goes for our relationship with God, with Jesus, with the Holy Spirit.
- Do we plan time for just us and God, some one-on-one time with God? Setting aside some daily prayer time is a good way to do that, using the daily prayer books is a good start. And then use your own words and thoughts, let God know how much you do love God, and are thankful for God's many blessings. Then, sit for a bit, calm your thoughts, then just listen for God to respond back to you, give time to hear God's word to you.
- How do we know what it means to be live a life focused on Christ unless we learn how to. Yes, coming to church is part of that, for sure. We can read the bible, read other books about God, attend a book study, or bible studies, or another type of faith based gathering to deepen our faith and knowledge.
- We show our love of God by living the ways Jesus taught: Matthew tells us in his 25th chapter: give food to the hungry, welcome the stranger, clothe the naked, visit the prisons, take loving care of the sick. Then there's that Great Commission pronouncement Jesus gave his disciples: Go and make more disciples, teach the ways and commands of Jesus, then baptize them in the name of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. This is how we show God's love to others, sharing God's love with others, doing Jesus' work for God's people. This is the 'love your neighbour as yourself' bit!

Relationship building, especially with those we care about, is a constant work in progress. To keep a relationship really alive requires a commitment to work on it; any self help book will even tell you that. Love is a verb, which means it's an action word. Keeping a healthy loving relationship going requires action, from both parties, and God's always on the job! I've heard it said that God is like the perfect lover, always ready and waiting when we're ready to be in relationship with God. God wants nothing more than to be in a loving relationship with us—it was why we were created! And truly loving relationships change us, when love fills us, we respond to others with love, with compassion, with care. And when it is God's Spirit of love that is filling us, guiding us and leading us, we see the world with different eyes -- with the eyes of Jesus. Amen.