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Our divine uniqueness: On Erich Fromm's 'The Art of Loving'

Chase Nordengren | Oct. 13, 2011

Love is not a thing that happens to us, psychologist Erich Fromm argues, it is a thing we do. Published in 1956, Fromm's *The Art of Loving* describes love -- for our neighbor, for our partner, and for God -- as an activity, requiring study, practice and intent.

Love is a skill set human beings develop and use through their own will, not a prize won by gaining someone else's affection and trust. Learning about and practicing love, Fromm says, ought stand at the center of our lives.

Exercising this skill is not only virtuous; it is key to resolving the "anxiety of separation" that lies at the heart of our lives. No longer united with God, or under the safe blanket parental love provides, human attention strays to focus on work, sensory pleasure or conforming with the broader culture. Each in turn emulates some, but not all, of love -- love is interpersonal, permanent and truly unitive.

The unity we seek -- unity with another person -- can only be accomplished through the work of love.

Fromm's elegant and challenging description of love, however, is not without the flaws of his time and place. *The Art of Loving* exclusively describes heterosexual love driven by gender roles, defining masculinity and femininity as character traits innate in men and women.

With those assumptions comes a host of declarations about how human beings ought grow, develop and act. Children, Fromm says, should transition gradually from "motherly" to "fatherly" love. Men should represent discipline and adventurousness to contrast with feminine protection and realism. Psychological illness, he concludes, results from a "disordered" attachment to one parent over the other.

These outdated notions, which bear some unfortunate parallels to church teachings on the nature of human beings, are rightly distasteful to modern ears. Taken in isolation, Fromm leaves us an unfortunate dichotomy: it seems we must choose either the objective, material love of contemporary culture or Fromm's activity-driven holistic love, paired with his strict definitions of how human beings ought grow up and behave.

This dichotomy is false. Through faith, we can preserve both Fromm's emphasis on love as skillfulness and a respect for all individuals and ways of life.

Fromm posits that love for God bears much resemblance to love for human beings.

"To love means to commit oneself without guarantee, to give oneself completely in the hope that our love will produce love in the loved person," he writes. "Love is an act of faith, and whoever is of little faith is also of little love."

Like loving God, loving another person is taking the big leap: assuming that under their bones and blood lies a self which persists and will love you back. To love is to posit the soul.

Love is also a leap of faith in its universality: "If I can say to somebody else, 'I love you,' I must be able to say, 'I love in you everybody, I love through you the world, I love in you also myself.'"

Universal love, however, is much more than tolerance. For believers in a creative God, responsible for the specialness of each human character, it is insufficient to love the poor, the oppressed, or the different in the abstract. We are called to love *them*, each of them, even if they do not play to our expectations and especially if they don't deserve it.

Without a love for the humanness in each person, Fromm argues, we cannot love that which is human about anyone. He who loves once, Fromm argues, is challenged to love constantly, to grow from love of one to love of all things.

Buried in a culture and a church which often fail to appreciate the divine origin of human difference, loving all the time is the most difficult Christian challenge.

Seattle evangelical pastor Mark Driscoll drew attention this week for declaring, in his Sunday sermon [1], ?God hates, right now, personally, objectively hates some of you.?

To understand love as Fromm does is not only to render such an idea repugnant but incomprehensible. The God we understand, who created and sustains the universe, is in a real sense love, the force by which the creation of life occurs.

Even the wrath of the Old Testament God, with its ultimate direction towards creativity, is a sign of love. Love is not only a gift God provides every living being -- it is, properly understood, the only thing God could ever do.

[Chase Nordengren is a graduate student at the University of Washington in Seattle, where he studies education policy. Among other projects, he edits a set of reflections on contemplative spirituality called "At Once Good and Imperfect" at goodandimperfect.net [2].]

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