

Chapter Four

Love: A Few Things I've Learned

"All I know is that, at every turn, I hear the word love surfacing as a longing for common life, quietly but persistently and in unexpected places." —Krista Tippett

OPENING QUESTION

"What is love? Answer the question through the story of your life." With this as a springboard, Tippett reflects on her past, tracing her understanding of love from a childhood in church to her parents' relationship to her own marriage, motherhood, and singleness. For her, as for many, the mantra of love equaling a happy home, two loving parents, and a perfect marriage eventually broke down.

Thinking back on your early life, what were you taught and shown love to be?

DISCUSSION STARTERS

Many would say that love is our highest calling and greatest task, but as Tippett says, love is also "something we only master in moments."

What would it look like to treat the moments of each day—often small and seemingly inconsequential—as worthy of a calling as paramount as love?

Consider our current collective challenges—politics, race, education, immigration, refugees, poverty, health care—and ponder this question Tippett asks:

"What if love, as Elizabeth Alexander asked on the Washington Mall on inauguration day in 2009, is the mightiest word? How would this word, tossed into our questioning, reframe and challenge it?"

Through a life of peace and nonviolence, civil rights leader John Lewis has exemplified love as a way of being, not a feeling. Even in his enemies, Lewis has chosen to recognize "a spark of the divine."

Do you have faith in the common humanity of your enemies?

Of course, Tippett says, "'Love' is not always or often the first response to violence and violation, one human being to another, nor can we expect it to be. Anger is also a moral response."

With love as a lens, how might one engage with anger in a generative way? Have you had or seen an experience of this?

In a world of overwhelming bad news and rife injustice, there can be two temptations: 1) fix everything, or 2) do nothing.

Do you identify with one of these tendencies more than the other? What do you think of Sister Simone Campbell's prompt to "Just do one thing"? How would it change you and your actions if you saw that intention as agape—practical love that might be shown to a neighbor, a stranger, or an enemy?

Moments of great crisis—September 11 and Hurricane Katrina, for example—call forth practical love of kindness, hospitality, and care among strangers. Consider this question that flows out of Tippett's reflection on the ethos of Dorothy Day:

Why can't we live this way all the time? What would it look like to try?

KEY QUOTATIONS

"I want to aspire to a carnal practical love—*eros* become civic, not sexual and yet passionate, full-bodied. Because it is the best of which we are capable, loving is also supremely exacting, not always but again and

again. Love is something we only master in moments.”

“Love is the superstar virtue of virtues, and the most watered-down word in the English language.”

“We’ve made [love] private, contained it in family, when its audacity is in its potential to cross tribal lines. We’ve fetishized it as romance, when its true measure is a quality of sustained, practical care. We’ve lived it as a feeling, when it is a way of being. It is the elemental experience we all desire and seek, most of our days, to give and receive.”

“The intention to walk through the world practicing love across relationships and encounters feels like a great frontier.”

“I have more questions than answers. But good questions, generously posed, seriously held, are powerful things.”

“All I know is that, at every turn, I hear the word *love* surfacing as a longing for common life, quietly but persistently and in unexpected places.”

“We know in our hearts and minds that we are bigger and wilder and more precious than numbers, more complex than any economic outcome or political prescription can describe.”

“What if *love*, as Elizabeth Alexander asked on the Washington Mall on inauguration day in 2009, is the mightiest word? How would this word, openly injected into our grappling, reframe and challenge it, informing all the other necessary computations and strategies?”

“The exacting, enlivening aspiration of love does send us inside to know and honor the particularities of our identities and our struggles. But it coaxes us out again to an encounter with the vastness of human identity.”

“To insist on faith in the common humanity even of our enemies and live accordingly; to begin with the assumption that love is there and it is up to us to make it real. Could we imagine that now?”

“Love, muscular and resilient, does not always seem reasonable, much less doable, in our most damaged and charged civic spaces. But it seems to me worth insisting that those spaces where the worst has happened do not utterly define us as individuals or a people.”

“Race, John Powell says, is like gravity, experienced by all, understood by few. But it’s never been a quality some possess and others don’t—it’s as much about ‘whiteness’ as about color. It’s relational.”

“Sorrow is a near enemy to compassion and to love. It is borne of sensitivity and feels like empathy. But it can paralyze and turn us back inside with a sense that we can’t possibly make a difference.”

“Compassion goes about finding the work that can be done. Love can’t help but stay present.”

“I feel more and more of us willingly seeing, choosing to care about the heart of the matter, holding the question of love, if you will, across all kinds of ingrained ideological, political, economic difference. Opinion polls, our way of taking the civic temperature, are telling this truth too in undeniable numbers: income inequality is a concern that crosses partisan boundaries. Counterintuitive impulses to care are forming left to right, religious to secular, across class and income boundaries, as though many of us are recalling that we do in fact belong to each other and are ready to make that real.”

“Deep listening’ is a virtue that anchors every kind of love relationship and it is the compass Sister Simone cites again and again as a creative, openhearted anchor to her life of strong passions and advocacy. She offers these lines of self-appraisal on whether one is being true to deep listening in any situation: ‘Am I responding in generosity? Am I responding in selfishness? Am I responding in a way that builds up people around me, that builds me up, that is respectful of who I am?’ Such questions are tools to start walking willingly towards the more exacting question of what would it mean, day to day, year to year, to become the beloved community. And how, concretely, to begin.”

“Love is hard to talk about in public, but intriguingly, when a person of integrity—like the patrolman Leroy Smith, like a Dorothy Day—speaks plain truths they live by, it adds up. We recognize what they are describing.”

“Change begins to happen in the human heart slowly, over time. Only then do the movements and leaders come along and topple the structures.”

“Love doesn’t always work as we want it to, or look like something intimate and beautiful. There are times and places in human existence when love means life on the line, but most of us need not live that way most of the time. . . . Sometimes love, in public as in private, means stepping back.”

“*Hospitality* is a word that shimmers, softly. It offers itself as an accessible entry point to love in action.”