

Whatever it is, it's a risk

dynamic forces.

It seems that love is larger than words can convey. Which makes things difficult whenever we're depending on words to convey our meaning.

If it is a risk to speak about love, it is also a problem. For it sometimes is easier to say what love is not, than what it is.

Love is not an idealistic approach to the world around us — a view through colored glasses, so to speak.

Nor does love necessarily produce a life of perfect tranquility or eliminate all conflict from one's life.

St. Paul met up with this problem when it came to speaking about love. "Love is not jealous," he wrote. To which he quickly added: "Love is never rude, it is not self-seeking, it is not prone to anger; neither does it brood over injuries. Love," said Paul, "does not rejoice in what is wrong." Fortunately, Paul did not stop with this litany of "nots."

In fact, he went right on to make this great claim: "Love never fails."

So it is risky to speak about love. But it is also risky not to speak about it. For among Christians, love is of the essence.

Love is the Christian way.

For the earliest Christians love was supposed to be characteristic, a trait by which they could be recognized. By love "all will know you for my disciples," John's Gospel stated.

Acting out of love, Christians were to be patient and kind; to bear each other's burdens and not to forget anyone's needs.

Love's forbearance, its trust, its hope and its power to endure are limitless, Paul wrote.

For Christians today, love is a high and demanding standard that asks more than just what is required to get by. Thus the moral life is distinguished not only by what is avoided, but by what is done — what is given — out of love.

It becomes a matter of where attention is centered. A people of love are able to center attention not only on themselves, but on others.

The word "love" is used so frequently today in popular music and advertisements that it risks becoming emptied of all meaning. Perhaps it is felt that everyone already knows just what love is and that there's little need to come to terms with its meaning. And perhaps the reality of love is easy to exploit since most people yearn so strongly for it.

Which, I think, makes it all the more important to put flesh back on the bones of this vital word in the Christian vocabulary.

What do you think love really implies? If Christians are to be known as people of love, who and why and when do they love?

(Gibson is editor of Faith Today.)

is what makes us human

toys.

"Brothers," Paul admonishes them, "do not be childish in your outlook. Be like children as far as evil is concerned but in mind be mature" (1 Cor. 14:20).

"You set your hearts on the greater gifts (but) now I will show you the way which surpasses all the others" (1 Cor. 12:31) the way of love. Without love all other gifts are useless.

"If I have faith great enough to move mountains but have not love I am nothing" (1 Cor. 13:2).

Notice Paul says, "I am nothing," not "I have nothing." Love is fundamental to Christian existence. Why? Ultimately because God created us to love. That is what being made in his "image and likeness" is all about.

God gave us a share in his creative love, to love creatively and unselfishly. This makes us authentically human.

When Paul proceeds to spell out some qualities of love, one is struck by their everyday, practical reality. Love is patient, kind, not

jealous, not snobbish, does not put on airs. Love is never rude, self-seeking, prone to anger.

What Paul has in mind is not some esoteric, abstract virtue floating around somewhere on a cloud, but honest-to-goodness personal relationships.

These relationships are modeled on the love which Jesus showed to all sorts of other, very real people. That love spilled over on Calvary where Jesus' love reached out to embrace even his executioners.

Let us think that Paul was exaggerating when he insisted on the unique importance of love, Jesus' own words call out: "This is my commandment, love one another as I have loved you...The command I give you is this, that you love one another."

"This is how all will know you for my disciples; your love for one another" (John 15:12, 17; 13:35).

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FOOD...

...for thought

"Without help, most alcoholics cannot permanently quit drinking. A combination of factors works to imprison the alcoholic within his addiction," according to "Under the Influence: A Guide to the Myths and Realities of Alcoholism," a book by James Milam and Katherine Ketcham (Madrona Publishers, Seattle, Wash. 1981).

"Without help..." Those are the words that perplex the families of alcoholics. They ask how they can give help or find it. How can they successfully encourage a person suffering from the disease of alcoholism to accept help — especially when that person resists help?

Alcoholism is one type of addiction many families face. Drug abuse is another. Others encounter other serious problems that threaten their peace or the stability of their homes.

But why speak about addictions and other problems in this supplement of materials devoted to Christian love? The answer is simple. Love, which is not easy to define, is often given under stressful circumstances.

When families encounter hard situations, how should they respond? Is love a passive stance that encourages us to sit back and do nothing? Or does love impel hard choices and demanding action at times?

Ms. Ketcham and Milam sug-

gest that waiting for alcoholics to realize they need treatment is "simply a mistake." Left to their own devices, the authors add, alcoholics are likely "to become less willing to seek treatment, not more willing."

Then, too, alcoholism untreated can become a life and death situation. "The alcoholic has to stop drinking or he will continually get worse," the authors say. "Waiting until he realizes the extent of his problem is waiting too long."

The authors say that more than half the alcoholics now being treated successfully got into treatment when "certain crises in their lives backed them into a corner and forced them to seek help." These alcoholics had not simply wanted to stop drinking.

Families, friends and others can help — but they can, also aid and abet the alcoholic, the authors suggest. To help, they need to do more than care. They must get informed about what alcoholism is, becoming able to draw upon their own best resources and the best resources of those around them. And they must care for their own health in the process.

What do you think it means to express love under difficult circumstances? What does this suggest to you about love's meaning?

...for discussion

1. Do you think of love as a powerful force in human life. Why? Or, why not?

2. David Gibson suggests that it is risky to speak of love. But for Christians, he says, it also is risky not to speak of love. What does he mean?

3. Cindy Liebhart's article speaks about friendship as a means through which God's presence in life can be felt. Why does she say this?

4. According to Father John Castelot's article, what did St. Paul mean when he wrote: "If I have faith great enough to move mountains but have not love I am nothing..."

SECOND HELPINGS

"Letters From an Understanding Friend," by Father Isaias Powers. Father Powers attempts to think as Jesus might have thought during his last year on earth. The experienced retreat director develops a unique technique here — writing 40 letters to disciples as he imagines Jesus might have written them. He says of Jesus' message of love: "I must love. That's why I was born; that's why I have set my face toward Jerusalem." But, the priest adds, "Love, real love, refuses to threaten, to punish or use coercion of any kind." He goes on to explain that the love Jesus brings is demanding. Still speaking as Jesus might have, the author writes: "I told them about love and the sacrifice that love demands. You know the story well. The Parable of the Good Samaritan is one of my best." (Twenty-Third Publications, Box 180, Mystic, Conn. 06355. \$4.95.)