

## **Big Love**

### **A Little Bit Should Go a Long Way**

By

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“One man and one woman.” That’s the slogan that’s been used by the extreme Right since 2004 in its continuing campaign to prevent the legalization of same-sex marriage. It’s also the phrase that got me fired from my secular job back in 2005 after I vowed I would no longer perform weddings for anyone until I’m free to perform them equally for everyone. It turns out the company I worked for had a policy supporting legislation that defines marriage as between “one man and one woman.” I bring this up now because I think its just one example of how some in our society seem to have a great interest in controlling who and how we love each other. And these days just about all of us have been convinced we’re supposed to love just one other person—so long as one of us is male and the other female—then go live quietly and happily ever after.

What’s most puzzling to me is that this narrow definition of love has been promoted most forcefully by Christian churches, not only regarding gay marriage, but, historically, in their refusal to support remarriage for those who’ve been divorced. This is so even though Jesus never taught marriage ought to be between just one man and one woman, but actually told his followers to love everyone alike, friend or foe. In fact, Jesus, who never married, envisioned a utopian age without it. “They will neither marry nor be given in marriage,” he’s reported to have said, “they will be like the angles in heaven.”<sup>1</sup> So his ideal Heaven, which he taught is something we must create here on Earth, excludes marriage altogether. Even the Apostle Paul, who is widely considered the true founder of Christianity, encouraged his followers not to get married, explaining that those who do, in his words, “will have trouble in this life, and I am trying to spare you,”<sup>2</sup>

So all of this leaves me wondering why the heck the Church has its nose in the marriage business to begin with, and why it’s determined to define love so narrowly? In short, I believe it’s because our dominator system cannot last in a culture of equality. If we all really saw our neighbors, or strangers, or even our enemies, as deserving of the same rights as us, then our patriarchal, authoritarian, elitist system would come tumbling down. In order to maintain a culture of dominion, those on top have to convince everyone else that it’s morally imperative to keep others down and out, to keep others on the bottom. So the idea of women relating without a patriarchal male in the picture, or, especially, of two men looking upon each other with love, realizing they are equals, goes against the dominator grain. And that’s why those upholding the dominator culture, culture where a few

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<sup>1</sup> Mark 12:25

<sup>2</sup> I Cor. 7:28

powerful males rule from the top down, have such a vested interest in so narrowly defining what love is supposed to look like.

Meister Eckhart, who defined love as justice, said, "Love will never be anywhere except where equality and unity are. There can be no love where people do not find equality and are not busy making equality."<sup>3</sup> Justice, if you will, is love in action. And equality is what love looks like when it's achieved. So the idea that love should be narrowed to something between just one man and one woman goes well beyond the issue of marriage equality. When we buy into the Cinderella fantasy that there is just one love, one person we are meant to love for the rest of our lives, we forget our moral obligation to love our neighbors, and, ultimately, to love the whole world. Love isn't a process of finding the "one," then moving into our castles together and hoisting up the drawbridge, cloistered away from everyone else. It's a process of expansion. Like the expanding universe itself, genuine love grows through us and radiates outward in ever widening circles of inclusion and awareness.

Sometimes I wonder if this need to put cultural limits on love isn't an outgrowth of our prehistoric psyche. If, like other primates, humans started off in small troops ruled over by one powerful male who maintained exclusive rights to all the females, it may explain why some feel it's still appropriate to control the love lives of others. If it ever actually existed, this primitive instinct may also explain the medieval "right of the first night," allowing the Lord of the manor to take the virginity of his serfs' daughters. There may be something to this, if we consider our dominator culture, which I do, an outgrowth of the silverback mentality that looks to a strong father figure, a patriarch, to lead and protect us.

According to Freud this system ended when a few sexually frustrated and otherwise oppressed sons murdered their domineering father, and, vowing never to allow such tyranny to arise again, became more egalitarian, including toward women. This would explain the archeological evidence for what Freud described as, "*associations of men* consisting of members with equal rights... and founded on matriarchy, or descent through the mother."<sup>4</sup> But, alas, their patricidal guilt got the better of them and they eventually tried to resurrect their dead father, first by erecting totem animals, then through hero worship, and finally by worshipping God the father. Women, in turn, were blamed for birthing evil into the world, and were appropriately subjugated again to a lesser status. God became the great silverback in the sky, and women the property of their husbands. Perhaps the "One Woman, One Man: God's Plan for Marriage," is but an outgrowth of a compromise these rebellious sons finally made with their dead patriarch: one woman per man.

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<sup>3</sup> Fox, Matthew, *Wrestling with the Prophets*, Jeremy P. Tarcher/Putnam, New York, NY, 1995, p. 156.

<sup>4</sup> Freud, Sigmund, *Totem and Taboo*, Barnes & Noble, New York, NY, 1913, 2005, p. 135.

But this isn't so much about marriage as it is the grander nature of love itself. Certainly love can and must exist between just two people, whether they are male and female or not, or whether they are lovers or not. Love is about equality, and any relationship based on equality is a loving relationship, sexual or platonic. If such is not the basis of the relationship, it may be a marriage, it may be sexual, but it isn't love.

More importantly, the mutuality between lovers is but one manifestation of love. It's love on a small scale, so small that it should not be epitomized as the end of love, but as its beginning. Perhaps love is like throwing a pebble into the water and watching its impact radiate outward into ever widening circles of love. We might start off just loving ourselves, concerned only with meeting our own needs and desires. But as we get a little older, we realize the needs of others are important too, and this can lead us to eventually falling deeply in love with another person. But then, as we mature, we come to realize that love has to keep growing and keep expanding, and it becomes egalitarian love—the kind of love that wants what's best for every person and every being, whether we know them or not.

This is what Erich Fromm must have been getting at when he said, "Love for one person, implies love for [all persons] as such."<sup>5</sup> By this definition, it's not really possible to love just one person. Love must eventually expand into the kind of universal love Fromm called *brotherly love*. "This kind of love," he said, "is the kind of love the Bible speaks of when it says: love thy neighbor as thyself. Brotherly love is love for all human beings; it is characterized by its lack of exclusiveness. If I have developed the capacity for love, then I cannot help loving [everyone]."<sup>6</sup>

So, as love grows, as it matures through us, it becomes universal love, love for all beings. Admittedly that's a pretty tall order, a pretty romanticized view of love, if you will. And, in fairness to the matter, it's worth noting that Freud considered such an expectation impossible and overinflated. "Thereupon, we find ourselves unable to suppress a feeling of astonishment, as at something unnatural," he said, "Why should we do this? What good is it to us? Above all, how can we do such a thing? How could it possibly be done?"<sup>7</sup> He was particularly troubled by the idea that we should love people we don't even know as much as we love ourselves, let alone loving our enemies. For Freud this is too grandiose and seems symptomatic of what he called *inflation*. "If the high sounding ordinance had run: 'Love thy neighbor as thy neighbor loves thee,'" he goes on to argue, "I should not take objection to it. And there is a second commandment that seems to me even more incomprehensible, and arouses even stronger opposition in me. It is: 'Love thine enemies.'"<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Fromm, Erich, *The Art of Loving*, Bantam Books, Harper & Row, New York, NY, 1956, 1963, p. 134.

<sup>6</sup> Fromm, Erich, *The Art of Loving*, A Bantam Book, Harper & Row, New York, NY, 1956, p. 39.

<sup>7</sup> Freud, Sigmund, *Civilization and its Discontents*, Dover Publications, Inc., New York, NY, 1930, 1994, p. 38.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.* p. 39.

It might surprise you to learn that I largely agree with Freud on this matter. But I think its because he's talking about love merely as a sentiment, that is, as a feeling, or emotional attachment. Certainly it is unreasonable for us to have such deep emotional feelings for everyone, even those we don't know, and, especially, toward those we find threatening. "...if he is a stranger to me," Freud said, "and cannot attract me by any value he has in himself or any significance he may have already acquired in my emotional life, it will be hard for me to love him."<sup>9</sup>

But beyond this I cannot agree with Freud. Love may begin merely as emotional self-attachment, and then, as emotional attachment to others, but it does not end with our emotional attachments, or, at least, I don't believe it should. Rather, as Erich Fromm put it, "Love is an activity."<sup>10</sup> We may experience it interpersonally, at times, but it is also beyond the personal. Love is universal. It is not something in us, but something we are in. Again, as Fromm complained, "Most people... even believe that it is the proof of their intensity of their love when they do not love anybody except the 'loved' person."<sup>11</sup> But he counters this view by further explaining, "If I truly love one person, I love all persons, I love the world, I love life. 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.'"<sup>12</sup> I think this kind of love is exemplified wonderfully in the way John Denver expressed his love for his spouse Annie, "Your fill up my senses, like a night in the forest, like the mountains in springtime, like a walk in the rain." He loved the world through her.

Yet, nowadays, the kind of love portrayed in popular music is usually the narrow, one person, one-man-one-woman, kind of love. That's the reason I quit listening to the radio decades ago. Popular music became boring, simplistic, shallow, and redundant. And this doesn't seem to have changed. Just yesterday I searched the Internet for the current top ten pop songs. Here are a few examples of what I found.

The number one song seems to be Christiana Aguilera's, *Moves like Jagger*:

You want the moves like jagger, I've got the moves like jagger, I've got the mooooooves... like jagger, I don't need try to control you, Look into my eyes and I'll own you, With them the moves like jagger, I've got the moves like jagger, I've got the mooooooves... like jagger

And here's another example from one of those artists who seems to have just one name we're all supposed to know, Adele:

Old friend, Why are you so shy? Ain't like you to hold back, Or hide from the light. I

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Fromm, *ibid.*, p. 18.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.* p. 39.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

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hate to turn up out of the blue uninvited, But I couldn't stay away, I couldn't fight it. I had hoped you'd see my face and that you'd be reminded, That for me it isn't over, Never mind, I'll find someone like you, I wish nothing but the best for you too, Don't forget me, I begged, I remember, you said, Sometimes it lasts in love, But sometimes it hurts instead. Sometimes it lasts in love, But sometimes it hurts instead

And though I couldn't pick her out of a lineup, here's part of a song from a name I'm sure everyone recognizes, Lady Gaga. It's called *You and I*:

It's been two years since I let you go, I couldn't listen to a joke or rock 'n roll, Muscle cars drove a truck right through my heart, On my birthday you sang me a heart of gold, With a guitar humming and no clothes, This time I'm not leaving without you, Ooh-oh ooh-oh...

And here's one more from some fellow named Lil Wayne that's actually entitled, *How to Love*:

You the one here talking to me, You don't wanna listen, But I admire your poppin bottles and dippin', Just as much as you admire bartending and stripping, Baby, so don't be mad, Nobody else trippin', You see a lot of crooks and the crooks still crook, See You had a lot of crooks tryna steal your heart, Never really had luck, couldn't never figure out How to love, How to love

How different and small is the understanding of love presented in these lyrics compared to those of John Lennon:

There's nothing you can do that can't be done. Nothing you can sing that can't be sung. Nothing you can say but you can learn how to play the game. It's easy. Nothing you can make that can't be made. No one you can save that can't be saved. Nothing you can do but you can learn how to be you in time. It's easy. All you need is love. All you need is love. All you need is love, love. Love is all you need.

Or the idea of love captured so powerfully by *The Hollies* anti-Vietnam War song:

The road is long with many a winding turn, That lead us to who knows where, who knows where, But I'm strong, strong enough to carry him, He ain't heavy, he's my brother, So on we go, His welfare is my concern, No burden is he to bear, we'll get there, For I know he would not encumber me, He ain't heavy, he's my brother...

And here's one more example of a more universal notion of love sung by my favorite lover of them all, John Denver, from his song, *It's About Time*.

"There's a man who is my brother, I just don't know his name/ But I know his home and family because I know we feel the same/ And it hurts me when he's hungry and when his children cry/ I too am a father, and that little one is mine."

Can you imagine the powers-that-be in our greedy Dominator economy accepting the premises in these songs, that all we really need is love, or that we are

obligated to carry the burden of welfare for others, and morally obligated to feed the hungry on another continent? No wonder they'd prefer to put limitations on who and how we love.

But if, developmentally speaking, we mature beyond midlevel morality—the morality that loves only those who are like us, in color and creed, gang or peer group, family and friend, nation or neighborhood—then we realize the universality of love through the principle of unity. For such love, Fromm said, “is based on the experience that we are all one.”<sup>13</sup> This universal love, he said, “is the experience of union with all [people], of human solidarity, of human at-onement.”<sup>14</sup> So, part of the point I'm making is that we don't have to know everyone to love them. And don't have to like or be like everyone we do know to love them either. We don't have to like anybody to love them! I've known some real curmudgeons who are some of the most loving people around. That's because love is an activity, and it exists beyond our personal feelings and experiences. Love is universal. And the problem with the world today, as in generations past, is that there's still isn't enough of it. The problem with the world is not men who love each other, or women who love each other, but men and women who don't love each other! And the solution is not to control who and how we love, but, at last, to finally begin doing precisely what a wise man tried to teach us so long ago, “You must love one another.”

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.