

The year after Mike and I were married, we took a job as house parents at the Walnut Hill School for Girls in Natick, Massachusetts. As house parents we lived in an apartment in a dorm and were allowed to eat three meals a day in the school's cafeteria. Our job was to be available to the girls for homework help, or just to talk, especially in the evenings and on weekends. And since we were both in the last year of our Master's degrees, having free room and board was huge in helping us meet our expenses that year.

Walnut Hill is a private boarding school for high school students in grades 9 through 12. Now it is co-ed and its focus is on all the performing arts. However, at the time, it was just becoming co-ed and its claim to fame was its dance department – especially its ballet program.

Well, as you know ballerinas can be short or tall – that doesn't matter, but what matters is weight. There is such a thing as ballet weight. Well, while we were at Walnut Hill, apparently someone in the dance department went to the headmaster to complain that the girls were getting too heavy. So what did the headmaster do? He put the whole school on a diet. Suddenly the food served in the cafeteria changed.

As they say, where there's a will, there's way. As house parents, we quickly discovered that while the whole school was on a diet, on Friday's after school, a group of girls from our dorm would walk the half mile down the hill to the center of Natick to the local Friendly's restaurant. There they would buy a half-gallon of ice cream. They'd get a bunch of plastic spoons to go with it. They would come back to the dorm, gather in someone's room, sit the half-gallon of ice cream in the center of the bed, and they'd all sit around it and eat the whole thing.

I lost four pounds the month that the headmaster put the school on a diet. I doubt that the girls lost anything.

We live in a culture that wants to quantify everything We weigh, measure, time, photograph, chart and collect data – lots of data – assessing anything and everything we can get our hands on. We also live in a performance driven culture. These girls weighed too much, according to the dance department. That may hurt their performance. Plus, what about the reputation of Walnut Hill School if it is sending out girls that can't perform well because of weight issues? So make them lose weight by reducing caloric intake. That should work, but I don't think it did work.

Christian love is the topic today. Someone once said that Christian love is like bifocals – it sees people in at least two ways. We see people close up, the way they are right now, and we love and accept them anyway. But Christian love also sees

people down the road, at the place where they will be and they seem to want to be. By loving, we live in relationship with people while we are seeking to accept and bring out the best in people as they are and as they will be.

The problem with the headmaster is that he didn't seem to see the girls as teenage girls at all. He didn't seem to trust them. He seemed to see them as people that needed to be controlled. He knew best! He didn't see them growing, changing, experimenting, in need of love, friendship and comfort – and isn't ice cream great comfort food? He didn't see the goodness and joy of a sweet reward here and there.

It reminds me that love is not just an emotion. It is also an act of will. Love takes effort, time, patience and sacrifice.

There's a saying out there that for adults, and probably children, too, the biggest form of exercise going is jumping to conclusions. In contrast, love doesn't jump to conclusions the way the headmaster did. Love takes the time to listen to the other person. Love takes the patience needed to build trust. Love makes the effort to go below the surface to hear with respect the other person's heartfelt dreams and desires, fears and hurts. Love cuts through the veneer to see the good now and the potential good of the future. Love will sacrifice in such a way that it will seek to draw out the best in the other person.

In this discourse Jesus is full of love for the disciples. He is lovingly, and patiently trying to prepare them for his impending arrest, trial and death. And love is a central word of Jesus's message, as well as his will and his way.

When C. S. Lewis studied all the various Greek words for love, he came to the conclusion that there is such a thing as "need love," and "gift love." Need love comes from some basic hole in our hearts or souls that needs to be filled. Need love is I love you because you meet my needs. It might be that my self-esteem is boosted when I am with you or it might be simply my need to be loved or for companionship is being fulfilled, etc. Certainly humans are born in need and remain in need all their lives. We need love. We need to be loved. We need to love others. That's part of being human. So I'm not apologizing for need love.

In addition to need love, Lewis says there is gift love. Instead of emerging from emptiness or lack, this love is born in fullness. Gift love seeks to enrich and enhance the person whom we love rather than to fulfill our need. "Gift love moves out to bless and to increase ... Gift love is more like a bountiful, artesian well that continues to overflow ..." Lewis concludes, saying that is what God's love is – gift love. In I John 4:7-11, "This is love, not that we loved God, but that God loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins." This gift love doesn't just come from God; it originates in God.

I think that gift love is what Jesus is talking about when he says "Greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends. You are my friends."

Jesus goes on to say to the disciples, “You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you to go and bear fruit – fruit that comes from your well of love-overflowing. So love each other.” In other words, Jesus is saying: when the trouble that is about to come, happens, hang on to this gift love. Although it will appear that I, Jesus, am abandoning you, I am not.

Like wise, if trouble is coming into your life, it may feel like God has turned his back on you, but he hasn't. Jesus hanging on a cruel cross simply and solely is because of God's love for us – God pouring out love from the fullness of his heart - a heart full to overflowing with love - love that is a gift. God's love never ends. God is still pouring out love on you, even in times of trouble grief and the like.

I wonder what it means to you to think that through all the seasons and circumstances of your life, God is pouring out love upon you, not because you can do anything to earn it; not because you can and must meet any of God's needs or even his commands, but because it is a gift to you. How would your problems and your joys look differently if you saw them through the lens of God, who loves you with a relentless, always present, never ending, loyal love that will never, ever let you go?

How would you look at other people differently if you interpreted Jesus' command to love one another to be one in which we strive to be giving “gift love?” - that gift love that longs to give to other people simply for their ultimate good?

I find that human love is a mixture of need love and gift love. That's the way we seem to be built as humans. I don't apologize for that. Yet, I also find the distinction between need love and gift love to be helpful. I find it helpful because when we talk about striving to be Christ like, the idea of gift love gives us a little better idea of what that means and what that looks like.