

The movie *Artificial Intelligence* opens with a scene inside the meeting room of a robot manufacturing plant. It's set sometime way in the future, or perhaps not so far when we have begun manufacturing robots that are virtually human. They have released all sorts of models onto the market but the director of the company is still concerned that they haven't reach the goal—to create an android that is indistinguishable from a real person. His defining characteristic is love.

And they create a little boy that can love. And the rest of the story unfolds.

Even science fiction recognises that love is a vital ingredient in what makes us human. I would suggest that it is the defining thing about being human. The thing that separates us from the rest of the animals on this planet. There are many statements in the bible that are talk about what God is and therefore what we are to be. These things are attributes of the image of God—God is holy, so we must be holy. God is merciful, so we must be merciful. God forgives, so we must forgive. God is love, so we must love. And I would suggest that love is the very essence of the image of God that we possess. Since it is from love that so much springs.

Our conscience develops from love. Our morality is based on love for others. Our sense of worth is found in community and community is formed from common bonds that sometimes look like love.

But the opposite is true too. Another defining thing about being different to the other animals on the planet, is our capacity to hate and nurture self-interest. Just look at history. Genocide, infanticide, homicide, fratricide, suicide—all manifestations of hate or self interest. Racism, fascism, capitalism—again, self interest and hate. I could go on, but you need only read history books to see it. Actually who needs history when we all know that we are living examples of self-interest at least at some point in our lives if not most of the time. Our little histories should be enough to convince us that hate and self-interest is a primary motivator.

If you're anything like me you will find that in many instances in life, Love takes a back seat. It doesn't take long to see that the universe revolves around me. In fact it seems that when we elevate ourselves above others, that's where the trouble begins.

We live in a time where love is now conditional upon what an individual desires. It is very much dependent upon how much I want to enter into the relationship. It is no longer about whether I am benefiting you, it's about whether you are benefiting me. It's not about what I can do for you, but what you can do for me. I will love you if you . . . It seems that in many cases, Love is only for a time not a lifetime, it doesn't stick through the worst of times it only enjoys the good times. And the thing is that it falls horribly short of what it can be.

But none of this resembles what John is talking about here.

What is love to John? It is that which says I will lay down my life for someone else. But more. It means putting others before yourself. How far do we go with that? Laying down our lives for each other. But that's the end of the continuum, the most extreme example. To me, the extreme is so unlikely : it's unlikely I will be required to lay my life down for anyone : but, and here is where we are all in this together, would I meet your needs over and above my own? Am I meeting your needs over and above my own?

This is something I am not good at. I find even in marriage that I quite often put myself first—and that's with someone whom I love dearly!

But the moment I legitimise that my needs are more important than Julia's, I run a terrible risk in making my love conditional, and the moment that it is conditional, it is not the love that God shows us or wants for us.

God wants us to love each other unconditionally. But first let's gain some perspective on love.

For me marriage has been the place where I have seen this kind of love exhibited the most. Our vows that included the phrase “no matter what” have shown me how gritty and strong love can be. Julia is a magnificent woman to have to still love me—I know that for a fact.

I think that this is one of the reasons why God is so favourable toward marriage. Marriage is meant to be a commitment “till death do we part.” If people end up living together in de facto then there is no explicit commitment. It is still conditional. “We'll see if it works out.”

This arrangement has an element of fear in it. And so there is no sense where love is ever expressed fully. There is always a chance that it will end. The commitment is “I'm not thinking of breaking up with you at the moment” instead of “I will never break up with you.” There aren't many de facto relationships that last a life time. This kind of love has

currents of fear under it. This kind of love I suspect has control or co-dependency issues underlying it. This kind of love lacks, in my view, the substance that God wants love to have. But for some reason mature society sees that this is still a really good idea. John says that “there is not fear in love, but perfect love casts out all fear.” He then goes on to say some huge things about the nature of fear, but the point still remains, love and fear are incompatible.

I was talking this through with a friend of mine about the idea of living together before you get married and he thought I was being quite bizarre. “You need to find out if you are compatible. What if you never lived with each other until you got married, and then you found that your partner always cut their toenails in bed?” But where’s the love there? Is that what his relationship hinges on? Wouldn’t love overcome that? A bit of dialogue, “honey I love you so much but would you be able to cut your toenails in the bathroom instead of on my pillowslip?” Compatibility is really vague : and it’s actually able to be sorted through with honest communication.

And another argument against marriage and you’ve heard it before probably, “what good does a piece of paper do? We love each other!” But at the end of the day it’s not for a marriage certificate in our filing cabinet that I got married, but because I knew, well as best I could for a 30 year old bachelor, I knew that I was committing before God and in front of over 100 friends and family to loving Julia no matter what until I die. “No matter what.”

This is the beauty of the marriage relationship. It gives us a glimpse of the love of God. He even uses it as a living example with one of his prophets Hosea. God tells Hosea to marry a prostitute who is going to cheat on him time and time again. And Hosea is instructed to forgive her time and time again as an example of the kind of love that God shows to his people. Time and time again the prostitute sleeps with other men, but Hosea loves her no matter what.

Time and time we rebel or try to kick sand in God’s face, but God loves us no matter what. Remember the worst thing you’ve ever done? The thing you are most ashamed of? God loved you even while you were doing it.

God loves you, so much that he sent Jesus to die for you, so that you wouldn’t perish, but would live life to the full both now and in the future. If that’s not good news I don’t know what is.

But marriage relationships are only a small part of the story of love. There is a sense where we can make these big “no matter what” commitments and follow through on them with our life partner, but John isn’t talking about marriage in this book, he is talking about people loving each other in the church.

And here is the challenge. What does a loving community look like? Acts 2:43; Acts 3:32.

Having all things in common, selling and laying at the feet of the apostles.

This is huge and it makes me feel uneasy. Where am I sacrificing for the good of this community? Where am I giving for the community? And this is the hard part of the message for all of us. Love is for all people not just your spouse, your family or your friends. It is for all people.

Why? Because everyone is loved equally by God. And that’s the standard. Love that is selective of who it cares for is but a dim form of it.

What does it take to be committed to someone who may throw it back in your face? What does it take to be committed to loving those who hate you? What does it take to commit to those who just bother you because you think they are idiots?

And I’m thinking often nowadays about my road rage. I’ve noticed that Mt Albert Road has a 40km/hour speed limit and I want to just hurry people along. And I get angry with them. Why? Because I don’t know them from a bar of soap. So I mumble things under my breath and get all angry about them. What’s that about? For a start, who cares, but more to the point of what we’re talking about here, this is a person I’m getting angry with and if it were a friend in front I wouldn’t be getting so annoyed. I’m certainly not loving this person or treating them with the respect that they deserve. Sometimes I’m so silly it hurts.

The human condition is such that we find being selfish easier than being selfless. We are motivated so much by stuff that lurks in the shadows of who we are that we cannot even know what drives us sometimes. And we need to learn to be honest about this. We need to communicate some of these things to people because communication is how love is expressed and nurtured. Ask any marriage counsellor that, almost all relationships break down because of lack of communication. And there you have it.

Perhaps what we need here is more honest communication between us all and perhaps there would be less bitching and moaning. In fact when communication does

take place, amazing things happen. But we shouldn't need special occasions for this communication, it should be a part of our nature of living.

We tell people who are feeling distant from God, why don't you pray? I'm thinking that we should tell people who are feeling left out of the congregation to talk to someone about it.

Why does Paul talk so much against gossip and slander? Because that's not communication, that venting and coercion. Most of the problems wouldn't be anywhere as big if we just talked to the person concerned about our issues. Having said that, the person needs to be listening with a loving ear and that's often where the breakdown happens.

We need to remember perhaps that the church is in process. The transformation that we are supposed to have (and many of us did and do) is often camouflaged by the mistakes we make. Even Paul confesses to this with doing what he doesn't want to do. He feels trapped in his sinful body. The flesh, or this state of existence that wants to gratify my own desires to piece together a fragmented ego, to create some kind of robust version of Stu that the world can see and accept and 'love'—this has more influence on my actions it seems than anything else at times.

And yet at other times, like in the prayer of Confession, I am consumed by a desire to be selfless for the sake of Jesus. I am overwhelmed by the beauty of God's unconditional love, his grace that says to me time and time again, when I hide my face because I am ashamed by the filth of my sin, "come here and let me wash you clean."

So for the sake of unity and sanity we are left with this commandment from Jesus. Love God and love people.

Before communion I would like us to an exercise.

Look around the room and look at all these faces. The of the person you most respect in this room and elevate yourself to their level. Think of the person in this room that you least respect and elevate them to your level as an equal. You may be catching a glimpse of what God sees. Now come to the table to share in God's unifying love.