
What does love look like?
Martin Grove United Church
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by Rev. Dr. Paul Shepherd

Based on 1 Corinthians 13:1-13 and Luke 4:21-30

First off - does anyone recognize this photo (Ron Ellis wedding at Rexdale United Church)?

Ah love. What a great theme for a worship service. What a simple topic to preach on. I mean, love is something we all ... love ... isn't it? Surely today, Rev. Paul must preach a comforting sermon instead of challenging us like he usually does. What's not to like about love after all? Let's just share a few platitudes about love, give a big "ahhhh", and go for coffee. Now you all know that deep down, I would love to accommodate you.

[slide: woman holding kitten hugging turtle]

And actually, we will get to that coffee sooner than you think this week, but of course, I believe that love is something worth discussing actually. And I have a quiz for us.

To begin, let's consider these 3 passages in the Bible. In 1 John 4:8 it says, "Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love." In 1 Corinthians 13:4-5 as we just read, "Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful" And in Exodus 20:5 (as part of the traditional version of the 10 commandments) it says, "I the Lord your God am a jealous God, punishing children for the iniquity of parents, to the third and the fourth generation of those who reject me."

When we put these 3 passages together, I hope it is clear that "love" is perhaps not so straightforward after all. Let's review. God is love. I assume we all agree with that. This idea that God is love is a wonderful idea, and is perhaps the reason you are expecting a bland sermon this morning. Next: love is patient, not jealous, and does not demand its own way. So far so good. But then in Exodus there is a description of a "God" that is jealous and demands his own way and punishes anyone who doesn't agree with him. And yes, I intentionally used male pronouns there. That's an image of a "God"

that sounds like Donald Trump, and not very much like love - or God - at all. What is going on here? Is God both loving and non-loving? Perhaps love is more than just looking at pictures of cute animals after all. Perhaps speaking about love will actually take some effort.

Well, I really don't want to get into that yet, so instead, let's have a quiz. What's this?

[image: americano coffee]

[image: espresso coffee]

[image: skinny latte]

[image: turkish coffee]

It is amazing to me that in English there are about a thousand words to describe different types of coffee, but only one word for "love". I mean, think about it. How many different types of love do you know about? But we only have 1 word. If I tell you that I love my wife, Marjorie, and I love chickpeas, I hope you realize that I don't interact with chickpeas the same way I interact with Marjorie.

In greek, there are at least 6 words for love:

- Philia: affectionate regard, friendship. Philadelphia is the City of brotherly love.
- Eros: passionate love, most commonly sexual. The word erotic comes from eros.
- Agape: love, especially charity. Sometimes communion is referred to as an "Agape meal".
- Storge: tenderness, love, affection, like parents with their children.
- Pragma: a model of love demonstrated during a lengthy marriage. Perhaps like in the recent United Church Observer, a form of enduring apathy.
- Philautia: self-love, but really meaning that you like yourself.

In some ways, perhaps we are not sure what St. Paul had in mind when he spoke about love. The meanings of words change over the centuries after all. Fortunately for us, St. Paul does not only use the word love (9 times in 13 verses) but he also describes it to us, as we have already read. St. Paul wrote other letters too - in Romans 6:32-36, St. Paul said, "If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners love

those who love them. If you do good to those who do good to you, what credit is that to you? If you lend to those from whom you hope to receive, what credit is that to you? But love your enemies, do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return. Your reward will be great, and you will be children of the Most High; for God is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked. Be merciful, just as God is merciful.” When St. Paul speaks about love, he is talking about agape.

But before we discuss agape more deeply, I want to discuss our gospel reading. In our reading from Luke, Jesus shares a prophetic reading, and then proclaims that it has already happened. Today, we confuse prophets with fortune tellers, people who predict the future. But in the Bible, prophets do not talk about the future. They talk about the present. And they demonstrate to the people the ways in which the people are going wrong. Prophets hold a mirror up to society to help them see themselves more clearly. Or to be more blunt, prophets help society see what they are doing wrong, what they have already been told about, and what the people already know they are doing wrong if they only thought about it themselves for 2 seconds. No surprise then that prophets get killed. I hope you caught the ending of our Luke reading, where Jesus is taken out of town to be thrown off a cliff to his death, but manages to slip away.

Here's what the Interpreter's Bible says about this passage “Jesus was saying to them that often ... it had been shown that God's goodness could not be appropriated by those who thought they had a special claim on God, but that it went out to all those who were eager and receptive - and those who were thus eager might be not those of orthodox privilege, but the stranger and the alien. Always there is a tendency to resent that. ... Anyone who suggests that other people of the earth might be equally important in God's sight is to be pushed aside as an intolerable nuisance.”

What was the issue anyway? Were the people upset because Jesus misled them? Were the people upset because Jesus lied to them? No! The people were upset because Jesus spoke the truth to them. Jesus only referred to history as described in the Septuagint – the Greek version of what we today call the Old Testament – the scripture that was read every week in that synagogue.

Jesus told the locals that God cares about everyone, not just Jewish people. And

for that, the locals tried to kill him. I find it intriguing that this is the lectionary text this week. Who would have known that 2,000 years later we would now be celebrating “World Interfaith Harmony Week” from February 1 to 7.

I wonder why we human beings resist the truth so strongly. In many respects, Jesus said very little that was not already known during his time. But I have frequently found that people respond poorly to the truth, and you have probably discovered that life-lesson yourself. Doing pastoral care in prison, I learned early on that when I said something that was simply incorrect, people just shrugged it off. But if I said something that was in fact a deep truth for them, I had to watch out. The truth may set you free, but that doesn't mean you won't be hurt in the process.

I think these themes come together very well. Love, and truth-telling. Surely if we love someone, we would want to find helpful ways to share truth with them. And I think that applies even more so with agape. From Wikipedia, “Agape is a Greco-Christian term referring to love, [specifically] ‘the highest form of love, charity’ and ‘the love of God for man and of man for God’. The word is not to be confused with philia, brotherly love, as it embraces a universal, unconditional love that transcends and persists regardless of circumstance.”¹ So agape does not require reciprocity. Agape is something we can simply decide to do, even if the other person does not reciprocate.

Nobody noticed this, but a moment ago I read some words from Romans that are perhaps the most provocative words in the entire Bible. I just read it through to see if anyone would gasp, and nobody did. Here it is again: “God is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked. Be merciful therefore, just as God is merciful”. That's what St. Paul is getting at in Romans - if I'm nice to you because you are nice to me, there is nothing honourable about that. Agape is about loving people we don't necessarily like. Agape is about loving people who do not or cannot reciprocate. Agape is about loving people we don't even know. Perhaps agape includes loving beyond the small, narrow view of the world that we hold to include all humans, animals, future generations, or even our planet.

I want to share a video from a modern day prophet. I selected this video because for me, it demonstrates agape. It combines truth-telling with being very irritating, but is

¹ <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Agape>

fundamentally based on love and truth. And yes, she will probably be thrown off a cliff - metaphorically at least. I combined 2 videos together. In the first part, Greta Thunberg, from Sweden, is 15. In the second part, she is 16. She is speaking to the heads of many countries who have studied and discussed climate change for decades and she is discussing climate justice.

[video: greta thunberg]² (main quote from video, “Adults keep saying we owe it to the young people, to give them hope, but I don’t want your hope. I don’t want you to be hopeful. I want you to panic. I want you to feel the fear I feel every day. I want you to act. I want you to act as you would in a crisis. I want you to act as if the house is on fire, because it is.”)

Prophets are not fortune tellers, they are irritants! Speaking truth - particularly truth to power - is notably bad for our physical health. Mind you, it is crucial for our spiritual health. Since we are now in February - Black History Month - I’ll use Martin Luther King Jr. as an obvious example of that fact. And now that you know her, Greta Thunberg is another example.

What truths do we need to tell right here? Either in this congregation or on the streets of Rexdale? What do we need to live out our own agape? “God is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked. Be merciful therefore, just as God is merciful”. Do you want to know what love looks like? Start there.

Amen.

² <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EpvuS0EbywI> combined with another source