

Back to Basics: What is Love?

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Luke 6:27-36

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Over the course of three sermons, I am exploring a theological triangle, which is my starting point for each sermon. Jesus tells us that the greatest commandment is to love God with all our heart, mind, and soul. Jesus also tells us to love our neighbor as ourselves. And through parables and by his own example, Jesus reminds us that God loves our neighbor as much as God loves us. These three aspects of faith cannot be separated from one another. To be fully human and fully faithful we live each day seeking to love God and love our neighbors, who like us have been created in God's image.

To understand this theological triangle, last week I explored the question "Who is God?" and talked about God as the Other-Directed Holy One, revealed in Jesus Christ, the ultimate source of all life for all time. Today I'll explore a second question, namely, "What is love?" Love is a hard word to preach on because the way it is used culturally is quite different from how it is used biblically. The scriptural understanding of love is far richer than the secular version, but the cultural definitions of love are so dominant and pervasive that preachers and people of faith always have trouble getting our message heard. I propose that by simply making two simple corrections to our understanding of love, we can move into all the richness this divine category has to offer.

Have many of you flown lately? Now that airlines charge people to check bags, a fascinating spectacle is to watch the parade of passengers with huge, over-stuffed carry-on bags try to cram them into crowded overhead compartments. Once you're on-board, watch the flow of humanity coming down the aisle and take side bets on whether the huge pink bag on wheels has a chance or how come the flight attendant didn't insist the army duffle bag had to be checked. Which leads me to my first metaphor about love: The English language word "love" is like a crammed overhead luggage compartment on a full US Airways flight for Chicago. (I hope that's descriptive enough for you.)

As English speakers, we use the same word to describe widely different categories of love. There are differences between how you love your pet, your parents, your second cousins, your work colleagues, or your spouse or partner; we mean different things when we say "I love chocolate," "I love world peace," "I love the Steelers," and "I love you" – yet each time the same verb is repeated over and over again. As many of you know, the Greek language (in which our New Testament was originally written) has at least three different words to describe the nuances of "love." It has the word "eros" to describe the unabashed devotion of lovers, "philia" to capture the sympathetic commitment of good friends, and "agape" to express a deep, even sacrificial care for others including those who do not show any care back to us in response. Like the

Gorgian Knot Hercules had to untangle, talking about love from a faith perspective is almost impossible until we clarify which type of love is most representative of the love described for us in scripture.

Secondly, as soon as I begin to analyze love, many of you will argue that my intellectual approach is all wrong, that I'm being too clinical and unromantic about something as emotional and passionate as love. One of the hottest tickets on Broadway right now is for a revival of the Rodgers & Hammerstein musical "South Pacific." One of its key moments comes when the hero sings about how some enchanted evening, you will see a stranger across a crowded room - and no, I'm not going to sing it - but in that moment they fall madly in love. Isn't that our favorite description of love, something we fall into - something that happens in a moment, an encounter of destiny like Romeo and Juliet, a fundamental urge driving two people together, a force of nature we cannot escape? This type of love is romantic, passionate, sexual, vigorous - how can sermons compete with that? But if you turn down the movie soundtracks for a moment and ask people about the nature of real love, you'll often hear a radically different melody.

Madeleine L'Engle said, "Love can't be pinned down by a definition and it certainly can't be proved, any more than anything else important in life can be proved...Love is not an emotion. It is a policy."¹ Frederick Buechner said, "In the Christian sense, love is not primarily an emotion, but an act of the will."² Mitch Albom in Tuesdays With Morrie wrote, "The most important thing in life is to learn how to give out love, and to let it come in. Let it come in. A wise man named Levine said it right. He said, 'Love is the only rational act.'"³ Love as a policy - an act of the will - the only rational act? Broadway musicals may not use that language in their hit songs, but if the musicals have endured over time, they likely have embodied those principles in their stories about true love.

A faithful understanding of love begins with recognizing that our first instincts about love are distorted by our self-centeredness. Listen to Henri Nouwen's discussion about the nature of true love in his own life. "I realized how limited, imperfect and weak my understanding of love has been. My idea of love proves to be exclusive (You only love me truly if you love others less), possessive (if you really love me, I want you to pay special attention to me), and manipulative (when you love me, you will do extra things for me). This idea of love easily leads to vanity (You must see something very special in me), jealousy (Why are you suddenly so interested in someone else and not in me?) and to anger (I am going to let you know that you have let me down and rejected me.) But love is "always patient and kind; it is never jealous; love is never boastful or conceited; it is never rude or selfish; it does not take offense, and is not resentful."⁴ Do you hear the difference between the biblical language and the self-centered language about love?

To move from the cultural language about love to the spiritual language of love, two basic correctives are needed. Correction #1: Love is primarily directed away from us. In scientific terms, love is a centrifugal, not a centripetal force. When H. Richard Niebuhr wrote about the theological triangle of love of God, love of self, and love of others, he offered three words to describe the character of God-given love. He said, love involves rejoicing in the presence of the beloved, feeling happiness in the thought of the other.

Love involves gratitude for the other's existence and presence in your life, being happy over her successes and his accomplishments without feeling jealous that you ought to receive the same accolades. And love involves reverence, never seeking to refashion the other into your own image or to use the other as a means to your own advancement. All three of those words – rejoicing, gratitude, reverence – point to the Other-directed quality of love. Can you picture this? More importantly, can you identify those types of loving relationships in your life? Love means we emotionally, physically, even spiritually identify with the beloved; or as Thomas Merton has said, we have a love in which all authoritarian brutality, all exploitation, domination and condescension are necessarily absent, so that in some sense we become the person we love and experience a kind of death to our own being.⁵

It is this love Jesus spoke about in our passage from Luke, calling us to be merciful as our God in heaven is merciful. For if we only love those who love us, from whom we can directly benefit or who meet our sexual, emotional, or personal needs, how does that count as true love? If we say the phrase “I love you” with a huge “I” and a small “you”, then we have misunderstood the entire concept.⁶

The second correction involves the theological perspective that is most at odds with our worldview of love. And a description of this perspective comes from the female mystic St. Catherine of Siena, who lived in the 14th century. Catherine said “Nails were not enough to hold [Christ] nailed and fastened on the cross, had not love kept him there.”⁷ Love is at the heart of the scandal of our faith – the paradox of God who so loved the world that God gave up the only-begotten Son to death on a cross so that we might live. Love kept Christ on the cross. This isn't something to be taken lightly or self-abusively. There is something fundamental about this type of love, something linked to the heart of life itself; the passion of eros, the covenant of philia, and the sacrificial commitment of agape all rolled into one category.

To put it succinctly, Correction #2 reminds us that love is not something we send up to God from our own resources but something that comes down to us from God and is shared with the world through us. Again the biblical understanding involves the opposite direction of the worldly views. Love is not something that emerges from our own resources, so that we can choose to whom we allocate our personal supply of love; rather it is something that comes to us from God, freely, unmerited, in generous quantities that exceed all that is reasonable. This love held Christ on the cross when every other definition would have removed him from such an affliction. This love persists in our modern world of death penalties and violence, fear and inhumanity, distrust and disobedience. This love is a love that will not let us go.

That's the power of Paul's definition of love found in Romans 8: If God is for us, who can be against us? If God did not withhold Christ, but gave him up for all of us, will God not also give us everything else? This is the only way it makes sense for us to be commanded to love the Lord and love our neighbor as ourselves. You can't command love, because by nature love is freely given, an outpouring toward others given without ulterior motive or compulsion. Love can only be commanded if God knows that love is

provided to all to be shared with all. This love can best be shared if we're sure that it comes from on high freely and generously, and is not ultimately dependent on our own resources or ability to love others sacrificially.

Love's shape is basically the shape of the cross (cruciform) – it flows downward for us and outward through us. By faith we see love for what it truly is: a gift and a commandment from God, an expression of hope and joy shared with others who help us finally discover ourselves reflected back in their eyes. Love is the gospel of Christ, who said "As I have loved you, you also should love one another" and in the living out of those words we make the sign of the cross.⁸ Thanks be to God.

AMEN

¹ Madeleine L'Engle, A Circle of Quiet, p. 45.

² Frederick Buechner, Wishful Thinking: A Seeker's ABC, p. 65.

³ Mitch Albom, Tuesdays With Morrie, p. 52.

⁴ Henri Nouwen, The Genesee Diary, p. 67.

⁵ Thomas Merton, The Wisdom of the Desert, p. 18.

⁶ Cf. Eugene Peterson, Where Your Treasure Is, p. 165.

⁷ Quoted by Madeleine L'Engle, The Irrational Season, p. 28.

⁸ Cf. Paul Duke, *Interpretation*, October 1995, p. 402.

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