
What does love look like?
Chapel in the Park United Church
February 2, 2025
by Rev. Dr. Paul Shepherd

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

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? We should 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. And just to prove it here is an image I hope you enjoy of a person holding a kitten who is hugging a turtle.

[slide: woman holding kitten hugging turtle]

And actually, we will get to that coffee sooner than you think this week. Sort of. But actually, I believe that love is something worth discussing. And I have a quiz we might enjoy too.

The Bible has a bit to say about love - and God. So to begin, let us consider 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."

Let's review. God is love. I hope we all agree with that. And if you think that God is more than love that's fine too. But God should be at least love. The idea that God is love is a wonderful idea, and is perhaps the reason you are expecting a flaccid 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. A "God" who punishes anyone who does not agree with him. And yes, I am intentionally using male pronouns because that is definitely what the author had in mind.

But let's be honest. That's an image of a "dod" that sounds more like Donald Trump, and not very much like God - or love for that matter. 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 reflecting on love will actually take some effort.

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

[image: americano coffee]

[image: espresso coffee]

[image: skinny latte]

[image: flat white]

[image: turkish coffee]

[image: kitten coffee]

It amazes 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, and I love chickpeas, I hope you realize that I don't interact with chickpeas in quite the same way that I interact with Marjorie.

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

[image: greek words for love]

- Philia: affectionate regard, friendship. Philadelphia is the City of sisterly 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 relationship. Perhaps as stated once in the United Church Observer, a form of "enduring apathy".
- Philautia: self-love, but really meaning that you like yourself.

So when St. Paul said the word "love", what type of love was he talking about? St. Paul's meaning is generally consistent with Luke on love. In Luke 6:32-36, it says, "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.” So when St. Paul speaks about love, he is usually 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 he proclaims that it has already happened.

[image: fortune teller]

Today, we sometimes confuse prophets with fortune tellers. We think that prophets are people who predict the future. But in the Bible, prophets do not talk about the future. Prophets talk about the present. And they demonstrate to the people the ways in which the people are going wrong. Biblical 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. Prophets tell people stuff 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.

[image: the truth will set you free. But that doesn't mean that you will like it.]

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. For 6 years I visited inmates in prison. I learned early on that when I said something that was simply incorrect, people just looked at my funny. But if I said something that was in fact a deep truth for an inmate I had to watch out. The truth may set you free, but that does not mean you will not be hurt in the process. And it certainly does not mean that you will like that truth.

Here's what my Interpreter's Bible says about our gospel reading. “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 [God' love] 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 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. That's the Greek version of what we today call the Old Testament. The Septuagint was what was read every week in the synagogues in Palestine in Jesus's day.

[image: all people are children of God. There are no “chosen” people.]

Jesus told the locals that God cares about everyone, not just the people who think they are more special than other people. And for that, the locals tried to kill him.

Our reading from 1 Corinthians is about love. And our reading from Luke is about speaking the truth. And I think these two 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 people and of people for God’. The word is not to be confused with philia, friendly love, as [agape] embraces a universal, unconditional love that transcends and persists regardless of circumstance.” So agape does not require reciprocity. Agape is something we can simply decide to do, even if the other person does not love us back or respect us.

I wonder if anyone noticed this, but a moment ago I read some words from Luke that are perhaps the most provocative words in the entire Bible. I just read it through to see if anyone would gasp, or if the sanctuary might catch on fire or be swallowed into the earth. So here they are again:

[image: God is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked. Be merciful therefore, just as God is merciful. Luke 6:35b-36]

“God is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked. Be merciful therefore, just as God is merciful”. That is true unconditional love.

[image: bishop Budde]

At Trump’s inauguration prayer service last week, Bishop Mariann Edgar Dubbe implored Trump to show mercy towards people who need help. And our media went nuts even though the Bishop was quoting Jesus. Donald Trump even asked for an apology. Well, sorry folks. But Jesus told us to be merciful.

Oh - and here’s a little life tip for any children. If someone quotes Jesus to you and you ask for an apology, you should probably re-evaluate your understanding of the Christian faith. Call me. I can help you out.

[image: God is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked. Be merciful therefore, just as God is merciful. Luke 6:35b-36]

I agree, these are perhaps the most provocative words in the entire Bible. Be merciful.

To be honest, I struggle with those words myself. And I find Luke’s words challenging. If I’m nice to you because you are nice to me, that is no big deal. Agape is about loving people we do not necessarily like. Agape is about loving people who do not or can not reciprocate. Agape includes loving people we do not even know. Agape includes loving beyond the small, narrow view of the world that we want to hold to.

I find it intriguing that this is the lectionary text this week.

[image: world interfaith harmony week and Black History Month]

Who would have known that 2,000 years later we would now be celebrating two events that speak directly to the truth that all people are children of God. Because yesterday, Feb 1, was the kickoff to both Black History Month and “World Interfaith Harmony Week”.

I’d like to talk about Black History Month briefly. And after service, I would love to hear your own perspective on this annual event.

For me, the story starts like this. I remember one day one of my children (I won’t say which one) came home from school - grade 4 I think. And the first thing he said when he got home was “I suck at math”.

My first thought was - you are not even doing math. You are doing arithmetic. You should learn differential calculus and then we can have a conversation about whether or not you like mathematics.

But my second thought was more typical. I was sad and angry. I was angry because my child had been taught at an early age that many great opportunities in life were not open to him. He had had been taught that many professions were now out of reach to him: science, engineering, medicine, computer science, and many others. Because he had been conditioned to the idea that he could not do mathematics.

Perhaps you have had this feeling yourself. With one of more of your children learning in school what they could NOT do, instead of being motivated by what they could accomplish in life.

And that reality has been true for many many school children for decades. Many children have been taught that there is no possibility that they can do great things. Specifically, black school children were taught that all great accomplishments were done by white people.

[image: Carter and his book]

That is ultimately what led Carter G. Woodson to write his book, “the mis-education of the Negro” in 1926. Woodson realized that the accomplishments of black people were completely missing from the school curriculum. And so black children were being taught that they should not expect to do great things themselves.

[image: quote below]

To quote from Woodson, “Those who have no record of what their forebears have accomplished lose the inspiration which comes from the teaching of biography and history” - CARTER G. WOODSON.

This led to an event in 1926, which was called “Negro History Week”. This was an educational program exclusively for black children. The intention was for black children to learn the history and accomplishments of black people.

Over time, this morphed into Black History Month. And the intention today is that everyone can learn of the great accomplishments of black people. And moreover, to realize that all of us can do great things.

Today, it is very easy to learn some black history. All TV stations, networks, and streaming services curate materials for Black History Month. And I encourage all of us to learn some black history. You can watch a movie, read a book, or even just talk to people.

But that is only the starting point. For me, after I learn some history, I want to reflect on that history and in particular decide what I feel about learning that history. And then, I want to share my reflection with someone else.

I would love to hear your own reflections. And I'm serious. I would love to know what you learned and how you felt about what you learned. And I mean that regardless of whether your reaction was positive or negative. We learn, and we grow together, when each of us speaks our own truth. That is the basis of loving relationships. In fact, love demands truth.

[image: quebec mosque vigil]

Last week was also the eighth anniversary of the mosque shooting in Quebec City that killed 6 people, seriously injured others, and terrorized an entire community of God's children. The simple truth that people do not want to hear is that we are all children of God. The desire people have to imagine what "we" are right and everyone else is wrong is wrong. It is childish. It is stupid. Truth does not get any simpler than the fact that all human beings are valued equally by God.

[image: prophets]

Prophets are not fortune tellers, they are irritants! But speaking truth is crucial for our spiritual health. So we need to do it.

What truths do we need to tell right here? In this congregation and our streets? 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". In what ways can we imagine - together - being a source of mercy in our part of the world. In what ways can we - collectively and individually - become more merciful ourselves.

Do you want to know what love looks like? Let's start right there.

Amen.