

“Love Actually”
John 15:9-17
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6th Sunday in Easter
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Last week I pointed out the difficulty of all this love-speak in the Bible when “love” has come to be known in our culture mainly with feelings and passion. The difficulty begins with translation from the Greek – the language of the New Testament to the English. In the earliest English translations, the Greek word “agape” – that appears nine different times in these 9 verses - is most often translated “love.”¹ The problem here is that the English word love comes from the German root “to have a passionate attachment to,” whereas the Greek has a deeper sense of generosity and commitment. Plus, the English is a lot less precise. Greek has at least four different words that all translate to the one English word “love.”

It can help to look at Latin translations. In the 4th century, the Vulgate – the first Latin translation of the Bible translated agape mostly in two different ways – as the word “dilectio” from which we get our word “diligence” or as the word “caritas” from which we get our English word “charity.”² Dilectio is the word that translators used in the text we read today. One scholar defines the meaning of dilectio as “an act of the will on the basis of a previous choice.”³

I was thinking about that definition on Thursday when Kate (my spouse) and I got into a marital argument. I got home unexpectedly early and started dinner. She arrived home to find me cooking an oven-based meal on a nearly 100 degree day. For some reason she thought this was a bad idea. An argument ensued that went something like this – why are you doing a meal that requires an hour-long bake on a 100 degree day. Me: “Why are you questioning my judgment when you could just be grateful that I’m making dinner?” Kate: “I could be grateful if you showed better judgment.” As you can see it was a very good fight. Anyway, during the fight I was not feeling feelings that may be described in the English as love, nor was I receiving indications that my beloved spouse was radiating such feelings. There was definitely energy between us, but not of the attractational kind. We were like two magnets pushing against each other. The English word “love” would not have been applied to the bickering taking place in the kitchen. But pushing through the anger, reassessing our own crap, return to each other with generosity and forgiveness was definitely an “act of the will on the basis of a previous choice.”

It matters how you define love. If you define it primarily as a feeling, then love comes and goes depending on the circumstances within you. But if you define it

¹ This is true of the Tyndale (1526), Wycliffe (1395), and Geneva Bibles (1560). The Geneva Bible was the most common Protestant translation used by Shakespeare, John Donne, John Knox and John Calvin (both of whom served as translators).

² Rarely did this Latin Bible translate agape as “amor,” a word which carries higher connotations of affection and attraction.

³ Carter Lindberg, *Love: A Brief History Through Western Christianity*, (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing), 2008, p. 16.

as an action, an action based on a choice you have already made to act toward the wellbeing of others, then feelings are important but not always primary. Love in the New Testament is less of a feeling and more of an action. An action for the wellbeing of the ones who are loved.

Jesus bids his disciples to abide in God's love. To abide in their love by loving each other. And in case we drift into an overly psychological view of love, Jesus talks about laying down one's life for one friends. An action, not a feeling. An act of generosity – no greater gift can be given. Even though Jesus speaks these words before his death in John's unfolding Gospel, the community that produced this Gospel would have heard these words *after* Easter *after* Jesus gave his life on the cross. On that day, he did not share warm feelings of love. He cried out on the cross, "Father, why have you forsaken me?" His action was an act of will based on a previous choice.

We hear these words on the *same side* of Easter as the community of John's Gospel. And maybe we too, need to be taught that love is more than just good feelings, that it sometimes comes with unpleasant feelings, with circumstances that pull on the fabric of those bonds of love. This seems like a critical lesson that we need to learn especially in these days when love is in short supply and we forget that some of the good values that shaped the early beginnings of this nation were rooted in this Gospel commandment to love. Rooted in more than just feelings, but in the real world economics of justice that love requires.

John Winthrop, addressing new Puritan immigrants to the Massachusetts Bay Colony wrote his own treatise on love as he imagined the divine project before him. Many of us have read portions of his address, "A Modell of Christian Charity," but remember the roots of the word charity in scripture are from *caritas*, from the Greek *agape*, love. Winthrop's often cherry picked writing says that God is honored by the sharing of gifts that belong to God. "The community of perils calls for extraordinary liberality" and we must sometimes help the distressed "beyond our ability rather than tempt God in putting him upon help by miraculous or extraordinary means." We must forgive the debts of those who cannot repay them, Winthrop urges which seems incredible to us only because love in our time is mostly about feelings and not so much about action. "Observe again," he writes "that the Scripture gives no caution to restrain any from being over liberal this way." Liberal meaning generous, rooted in the Old Testament obligation of those with wealth and means sharing with those without. Charity was not the weakened, condescending meaning that it has today where people give tiny percentages of their excess wealth to make themselves feel good. It was the recognition that all are made in the image of God and therefore we are bound to each other, responsible for our mutual wellbeing, beyond the usual human stinginess that dominates our political conversations today.⁴

⁴ Thanks to Marilynne Robinson for walking through Winthrop's speech in her essay, "Open Thy Hand Wide," in *When I Was a Child I Read Books*, (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux), 2012, 79-81.

"If the colony fails to love like that "seeking great things for ourselves and our posterity the Lord will surely break out in wrath against us. And "if our hearts shall

The best place to experiment with that love, Scripture teaches, is in the church and not necessarily because we are better at it than anyone outside of it. Certainly not because Christians are more deserving of love than others. No, because we are explicit here in our agreement that Christ commands us to love. Christ commands us to abide with each other in love. It means we abide with each other even in the kitchen conversations of our relationship where we put off the most heat. We don't give up on each other just because our feelings get a little hurt.

Because, Jesus tells us, that's exactly who God is to us. The one we continually offend with our destruction of the good gifts of our earth, our community, and the bonds of fellowship between us. The one we offend everytime the newcomer to the church or to the nation gets a cold shoulder instead of a blanket of embrace. The one we offend with our policies of division, our refusal to acknowledge much less repent of our racist past to chart a different way forward. The one who, nevertheless, won't give up on us as a people, won't give up on you as a person loved and claimed in the Lord. God's fierce love for us is action, an act of will based on a previous choice.

Will Willimon told a story about a parishioner who told him she hadn't been doing that well.

"Our son's been putting us through hell."

"I'm so sorry, said Willimon, "How old is your son?"

"He's eighteen, and uh, we have not known where he was for the last six months. We basically changed the locks on the door. I pray for him every night, but we didn't know where he was, and last week, during dinner, suddenly somebody is pounding on the door. We open the door and there he is! And he starts this string of profanity.

I said, we're eating, come on in, sit down and eat with us and he refuses to sit down at the table and he storms back into his room, he slams the door shut, and I can hear the door lock.

And my husband sat there and he got up, poured himself a drink, went out, turned on the TV. That's kind of how he handles it. And I put my napkin down and got up and went down the hall. I went out to the garage, and I looked at my husband's tools and I got this big hammer, this large hammer. I walked back from the garage back in the hall, stood in front of my son's door. I asked him, "Open the door."

And this string of profanity pours out.

So I took that hammer and I leaned back and hit with one good hit. I knocked the whole doorknob, the lock, everything right off the door. Just split the door in two. And I barged through the door. And my son looked terrified. And I caught him right

turn away so that we will not obey, but shall be seduced and worship and serve other God, our pleasure and our profits. . .we shall surely perish out of the good land." The fact that Winthrop calls profits a false god is never something that politicians in our country include when they reference Winthrop's "city on a hill," an image that used to convey that the colony's failures will be "conspicuous and notorious," Robinson, p. 81.

up under his chin like this and I slammed him up against the headboard of the bed and I said, I went into labor because of you. And by God I am not giving you up.⁵

Willimon says God is like that with us. An act of the will based on a previous choice.” Love that won’t let go even when we self-destruct. Love that won’t give us up.

⁵ This account is quoted from Willimon’s first lecture “Jesus Saves” delivered at the Midwinter Lectures, Austin Theological Seminary, Austin, TX, February 4, 2008. Relayed from a colleague who heard it in a sermon by Jon Walton, First Presbyterian Church, April 13, 2008.