

There's so much going on in our world today and almost all of it feels heavy, out of control, desperate, ugly and fear-filled. We can name them, they're in the news: Once in a millennia flooding in Colorado; Syria—to bomb or not, have we gained or lost world prestige/have we become weak—the equivalent of being called a sissy.

Then there's the government shut down ----and the House's passing a dramatic cut in food stamps as the country limps out of a recession. I was particularly taken by the clause that would bar people who are unemployed from getting food stamps. Another rampage of mass killings, and then another; unemployment remains well over 7% and its significantly higher for those with few salable skills. It's weighty stuff and can feel depressing.

In times like these, we should not forget about this thing called love. Whatever it is, however its defined, whatever it's source...we should not forget love exists. Even when it goes into hiding, or gets lost in the tumult of our days, love is omni-present. It feels refreshing and uplifting just to say it. Love is omni-present and available to us all.

Isn't it interesting, that something so prevalent, so omnipresent so impactful in all our lives, is so poorly defined. Maybe it's because love can be experienced in so many different ways. But I suspect it has more to do with the category of existence in which it resides. Like infinity, the cosmos, God, mystery, death—we know about these things and can find definitions for each in the dictionary but the words always seem to leave us wanting in terms of their true meaning. In a real sense, these are concepts, not tangible, identifiable "things".

We can say I love my country, I love my daughter, I love my cat. We say I love the sound of waves lapping at the shore, I love playing computer games. I love books. One can say these things and we understand what is meant. We're able to make the distinctions between their different meanings. Loving my country can't be the same as loving my daughter which has to be different from loving the sound of waves. One word for so many different things and yet, by in large we think we understand the meaning of each.

What does it mean to say I love books? Any book? All books? Does it really mean I love to learn or I love a good story? Does it mean I love the way words are used? Or does it mean that I love being engaged in a particular way that takes me outside of myself or provides me another frame of reference or creates a different reality than the one I regularly live with? Maybe it's all of the above and maybe its any one at any given time.

And at what point does like become love? I don't know that anyone can tell you where the line of demarcation lies. I rather suspect that most of us simply don't know. Yet we seem to know when to use one word instead of the other. While we may not know where one begins and the other ends, we do seem to know the difference.

This thing called love can be very confusing at times. It certainly is a potent force in our lives. It can cause us to have more books around than we have space to handle. The love of gambling can cause us financial ruin. Love can drive us to do crazy things. It can drive us crazy if it's not returned in kind. And love can provide the strength to lift a car off our child. This thing called love is a powerful force.

Are humans pre-wired to know love? Are humans the only animals who love? Some would argue that a dog's loyalty is a manifestation of love. And what of primates who groom each other, is that love? Elephants are known to exhibit a ritualistic behavior ...when one of their own dies. Is that instinct, learned behavior or is it love? I don't know, but I do know love does exist! And it has power in our lives, a power that manifests differently in different people and in different ways.

So how do we understand this thing called love? As I was doing research for this sermon, I was drawn to the ancient and modern Greek language which has different words for different kinds of love; four different words representing different kinds of love. Even so, the meanings of those words can tend to overlap. They are agape, eros, phileo and storge.

Lets take them in reverse order.

Storge is family love, the bond among mothers, fathers, sisters and brothers. Biblically it's expressed in the commandment to love thy father and thy mother. C. S. Lewis in his book *The Four Loves*, talks about Storge as affection. A fondness built on familiarity, brotherly love and the fondness of those who find themselves together by chance.

He describes it as the "most natural, emotive, and widely diffused of loves". It's natural because it exists without coercion. It's emotive because it comes out of fondness. It's the most widely diffused form of love because it pays the least attention to what is culturally deemed "valuable" or worthy of love. According to Lewis, storge transcends those characteristics by which we often evaluate people. It expresses mere acceptance. He sees this type of love as the vast majority of solid, long-lasting relationships.

Phileo. Is a particular kind of affection, better known or understood as Friendship. C.S. Lewis calls this "the strong bond existing between people who share common interest or activity. He describes friendship as, "the least biological, organic, instinctive, gregarious and necessary [of loves]...the least *natural* love". He tells us that, as a species, we can reproduce without friendship and that is exactly why the ancient world saw this as a profound form of love...because we freely choose it.

Aristotle speaks of three different types of friendships based on the motive for forming them: friendships of utility, friendships of pleasure and friendships of the good. Friendships of utility would be a relationship that exists to allow a transaction, like customer and sales clerk. A friendship of pleasure would be between people that have a shared interest; love to go fishing together.

A friendship of the good would be what we could call an authentic relationship, an authentic friendship. One in which we do something for the other, not for self. But in so doing, we are also benefited. Aristotle would argue that the only justifiable reason for doing anything is that it would contribute to a fulfilled life. So actions based on *phileo* are good in and of themselves and also good for the giver.

Eros. We all know the god Eros, and his Roman counterpart, Cupid. Some of us seek and some of us fear his arrow in the heart prompting passion, sensual desire and longing. It's romantic, pure emotion, without the balance of logic. Eros is the basis of the words erotic and erotica. But if we look to the ancients, the physical, sensual desire of Eros is not its only meaning.

In the Symposium, Plato defines what we've come to know as Platonic love, a love without sexual desire. He conceives of *eros* as a love that is more than *Phileo*, more than friendship. While *eros* is first experienced as love for a person, with contemplation, it becomes an appreciation of the beauty within that person, even appreciation of beauty itself. He argues that *eros* helps the soul recall inherent knowledge of beauty, and contributes to an understanding of spiritual truth. He says that the ideal form of beauty leads human beings to feel erotic desire. He suggests that even physical, sensual-based love aspires to the non-corporeal, to the spiritual plane of existence, finding its truth. For Plato, finding any truth, leads to transcendence. In other words, leads to the spiritual.

Agape is a generalized sense of love. It's an affection deeper than the desire of *eros*, more spiritual than *Phileo*. It's generally thought of as "unconditional love", a selfless love. Agape is a love that's all about giving, with no expectation of receiving something in return. This is the love we heard about in our reading this morning from I Corinthians and is the love referred to repeatedly throughout the New Testament. It's a spiritual love, a love that may well require personal sacrifice. Agape is a love that abides, separate from the temporal realities of any given moment. This is what Christians perceive as the love of God.

The Epistle of 1 John, not to be confused with the Gospel of John, speaks to Jesus's commandment to his disciples after the last supper to love one another as he had loved them. Verse 4:7 Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God. 4:8 Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love.

Whether you believe in God or not, love one another is a good admonition. But it's particularly important just what meaning of the word love we reference when we talk about loving one another in a community such as ours. The love of family is important and often sustaining. Eros, whether in its sensual form or elevated form of beauty is valuable and may well lead to spiritual awakening. Phileo is very important. Friendship that calls out our authentic selves is more valuable than gold.

But agape, agape stands above all others. Family, friendship, and the search for truth can indeed be rewarding and for many of us satisfying. But a spiritual love is divine, sublime, fertile and uplifting. And I suspect few of us have much experience in either giving or receiving unconditional love. I suspect most of us know of it mostly as a concept.

I truly believe that a vibrant faith community is built on and infused with this kind of love. Agape. It's this kind of love that allows us to give wholeheartedly without first calculating what's in it for me. Whatever one believes about God, I believe the spirit of god, is love; a very particular kind of love.

May we find it here among us. And may the spirit of love ever guide us.

Ashee and Amen