

FRANKLIN CONGREGATIONAL-CHRISTIAN CHURCH, UCC  
Sermon for Sunday, April 21, 2024

I wonder how many young girls ask their moms, “How will I know I’m in love?” Some moms respond with lengthy explanations, others reply enigmatically, “You’ll know.” Then the girls often ask, “Am I in love?” And mom replies, “If you have to ask, you aren’t in love.” Anyone who’s ever been in love knows that mom’s responses are correct. Love, whatever it is, when you’re in it, you’ll know it.

The dictionary says about Love – a strong, complex emotion of personal attachment, causing one to appreciate, delight in, or crave the presence of the object; and to please and promote the welfare of that object; devoted affection or attachment; specifically: the feeling between husband and wife, brother and sister, or lover and sweetheart; One who is beloved;

Love is all these things and more. One of our problems is that in English we have only one word for all those dynamics – the Greeks on the other hand, have 4 words for love – philia – social love, endearment, the affection of friends; storge – familial love and care, brother, sister, parent, child; eros – both of sexual love and the passion and emotional obsession that seeks to possess something for it’s own sake or fulfillment; and finally agape – a little used word in pre-biblical Greek, which has neither the intensity or eros, nor the warmth or given-ness of philia, and is less a feeling or emotion that a decision.

Agape – active concern for the welfare of the other for the other’s sake.

Agape is the dominant word for love used in the New Testament. Love as the Bible uses the word is self-giving on behalf of another without the expectation of any return. The love the Bible talks about emerges out of concern for another’s welfare and gives of itself to the other without the expectation of receiving something in return. Rather than grasp, control or hold on, it frees and empowers. It spills forth from abundance rather than need, fullness instead of longing, and is redemptive in that it focuses on the other’s needs so they become more important than one’s own.

How do we best know this agape love? It is personified most fully through the life of Jesus Christ. “We know love by this” writes the author of 1 John, “That he laid down his life for us.” “Greater love than this has no one.”

In today’s gospel lesson we hear Jesus explain his love for us in the metaphor of the good and faithful shepherd who lays down his life for his sheep. In doing so, Jesus is identifying with the promise personified in Psalm 23, the promise God made through the prophet Ezekiel – “I myself will search for my sheep, and will seek them out.” God promises the scattered people of Israel, crushed through the burdens of exile that they will be sought out and gathered from their dispersed, isolated places like the shepherd gathers up the scattered sheep of a flock and brings them home to safety and care.

Sheep are interesting creatures, cute, not smart like goats, and driven by their stomachs. They eat endlessly. Not only are they ingenious in searching for food, they scatter from being a cohesive group so the shepherd must search them out.

Though we humans don’t like to be compared to sheep, but our appetites for consumption can do to us what it does to them – scattered and isolated or exiled. It was the appetites of the people of Israel that lead them into exile, in much the same way our contemporary appetites can lead us into exile and scatter us from God and God’s people. It may be a greener pasture, maybe recreation, leisure time families, the need for rest, the need to take care for or use that country home while finding so little time there you don’t make it to church for some time. You would be astonished as the explanations used to explain why someone has not been in church for a while – the things that exile us from being in God’s presence and from God’s people – thus losing out on the nurture, the love, the comfort that comes from regularly attending worship. And so we scatter – just as Israel was scattered. In the book of Acts God promised to come and seek them out, not for God’s sake, but for the people’s sake. “I will seek out the lost, and I will bring back the strayed, ...bind up the injured, and strengthen the weak.” This is what lies behind Jesus’ use of the shepherd image to explain himself and his mission in life. Scripture says, “This is love: he laid down his love for us...and we ought to lay down our lives for one another.”

Wow! That's a huge criteria for membership – is this something we can do? Something I can do? Discipleship calls on us to lay down our lives and the stuff of our lives on behalf of one another. John asks, can we even suggest that God's love abides in us if we see another in need and refuse to help? I'm not sure about you – but my upbringing didn't teach me about this – partially that's because we weren't a church going family, partially because of the people my parents were. It took me a long time to learn to put others first – to put another's need before my own – It's something I still struggle with – you know, two steps forward, one step back...

But you all on the other hand – you are so amazing at giving and giving and laying it all down for others – for each other, for God. You do so much giving, most often anonymously, but give you all do. Your concern and open-hearted acts of love for others is inspiring. You practice the agape love scripture talks about. You all give expecting nothing in return.

Maybe you're sitting there in the pews squirming – is she talking about me? Yes. It's you. John has a word for you as well – “whenever our hearts condemn us, God is greater than our hearts.” This means God is working within us – God knows who we have been, who we are, and most importantly who we are becoming.

This may mean it's time to act on the stirring inside us – act on something we've been holding back on – Maybe it's time to give something to God by laying it down for another. When we act selflessly for another, we do it for God. Always, we do something deeper, more meaningful for God.

John ends his text reminding us this is God's command. God's charge is two-fold – to consider and follow Jesus' teachings, and to love one another with a love like his – a love not based on passions or affections, rather desiring to make a difference in another's life. This is when we will live in God, and God will abide in us. This kind of love fills and fulfills and becomes an act of generosity so endless that somewhere along the way it becomes a habit. A heart habit. Amen.