

Sermon 4-14-24

Paul Purdue preaching

Sometimes you'll pick up a scholarly article or a legal contract and it will begin with a glossary defining unfamiliar words or technical terms. Some words like love or hate may be used so widely that knowing just what someone means when they say "I love that" is not that clear. If you tried to arrive at a definition of love by listening to all the love songs ever written, you might plead with Foreigner "I wanna know what love is!" After church last Sunday, one of our parishioners shared how during the sermon they were wondering about how First John defined Love. What is Love?

I will never forget working as a church camp counselor, when another counselor grew frustrated with the teenagers lack of attention and shouted out: "I am telling you this because I love you". I do not remember what they were shouting in Love's name because I got so tickled that my laughter infected the teens. There are plenty of examples of people thinking they are doing something loving, sometimes even shunning or judging in the name of God, when they are actually doing harm. If some understandings of love lead people to sometimes act cruelly in the name of love then how do we define "Love"?

Not even one of the 66 books of the Bible has a glossary defining key terms like, love, hate, forgiveness or justice. A good Bible dictionary is helpful especially since the Bible was written in Hebrew, Greek and Aramaic. A good readable Study Bible, like the CEB study Bible (<https://www.cokesbury.com/9781609262150-The-CEB-Study-Bible>) is a tool we all should have and use. However, there is no dictionary or glossary in the Bible. Instead, the Bible defines terms like love by telling stories.

Instead of beginning with a definition of God the Bible starts with a story. In the beginning, God spoke: "let there be light", and light appeared and there was the first morning and evening, and God saw how good the light was ... and on the sixth day our Creator made the animals and then people, "God created humanity in God's own image, in the divine image God created them... and God blessed them... and that's what happened. And God saw everything that God had made and it was supremely good." Genesis one offers an image of God, but the second chapter offers a little different perspective. It's almost like where First John writes "on the other hand".(1 John 2)

The New Testament introduces us to the second member of our Holy Trinity: Jesus the Christ not with a definition but with stories. Luke begins with Zechariah, Elizabeth, and Mary and then in chapter two shares that during the reign of Caesar Augustus,

everyone went to their hometowns to be taxed. So recently married and very pregnant Mary headed to Bethlehem with Joseph. “While they were there, the time came for Mary to have her baby. She gave birth to her firstborn child, a son, wrapped the child snugly, and laid Jesus in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn. Nearby shepherds were out in the fields guarding their sheep at night. The Lord’s angel stood before them and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were afraid. God’s messenger announced, “Don’t be afraid! Look! I bring good news to you—wonderful, joyous news for all people. Your savior is born today in David’s city. The infant lying in a cow’s feed box is Christ the Lord.” In Luke, an angel tells us a bit about Jesus, but our understanding of Jesus comes as we read how Jesus taught, healed, fed folks, hung out with those called sinners, washed feet, flipped over tables, forgave and welcomed.

Perhaps, First John gets closer to a dictionary’s definition of Love and Jesus than any other book: “This is how we know love: Jesus laid down his life for us, and we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers and sisters.” (1 John 3:16) “This is how the love of God is revealed to us: God has sent God’s only Child into the world so that we can live through Christ. This is love: it is not that we loved God but that God loved us and sent God’s Son as the sacrifice that deals with our sins. (1 J 4:10) This echoes 1 John 2:2 “Christ is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world.” In Matthew 12 Jesus says “Therefore, I tell you that people will be forgiven for every sin and insult to God (and Christ). But insulting the Holy Spirit won’t be forgiven.” Matthew gave us no glossary, but the idea that God forgives even insults hurled at God belongs in our definition of God

This is Love- that God so deeply loves us, that God created us in the divine image, and then Love led God to come and be with us, so vulnerable as to be laid in a cow's feed box crib and one day suffer on the cross the worst indignities, biases and injustices we humans know how to inflict upon each other. What is love? First John points us to the cross- the place where God’s boundless grace meets humanities’ worst; dishonesty, abandonment, police brutality, judicial and religious corruption, angry mobs, murder, mocking, systemic injustice and indifference, inhumanity or what the Bible calls sinfulness. And what does Love do finding itself on the cross? In Luke, just after being crucified Jesus prayed, asked, or commanded; “Father forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.” (Luke 23) Love meets hatred with compassion. Perhaps love is meeting the world with compassion?

In Law, Love and Civil Disobedience, Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King wrote: Love is understanding, creative, redemptive, good will to all people. It is an overflowing love which seeks nothing in return. We love people not because we like them but we love people because God loves them, and we rise to the point of loving people who do evil while hating the evil deed that they do. I think this is what Jesus meant when Jesus said

“love your enemies.” I'm very happy that Jesus didn't say “like your enemies” because it is pretty difficult to like some people. “Like” is sentimental. It is pretty difficult to like someone who threatens your children or to like a member of Congress who tries to defeat civil rights. But Jesus says “love them” and love is greater than “like”. Love is understanding, redemptive, creative good will for all people. This whole ethic of love is the basis of our movement.” (adapted)

There on the cross, Jesus, fully God and fully human, chose to die with forgiveness on his lips. Jesus breathed his last choosing love over hate, revenge, repayment, or retribution. Why die engulfed in hatred, why not embrace love? Even as humanity shows its worst impulses Jesus points us towards a better way: forgiveness, a fresh start, creativity, redemption, understanding, and good will.

You might protest what about justice? In Matthew 12, Jesus says we will all give an account of all our words (and deeds). Paul writes in Romans 12 “So then, each of us will give an account of ourselves to God.” If one day “we will know completely and will be completely known by God” then maybe such self-awareness creates justice even as love heals us. (1 Cor 13) Growing up I knew mom loved me. Mom never belittled me but instead cried with me around the dinner table as I struggled with my dyslexia and some subsequent bullying. However, when I did get in trouble for something, Mom would push her glasses down her nose and look over them right into my eyes. I would prefer a week without recess and a paddling from the principal over moms looking over those glasses. You see, I was not certain Sister Mary Delela loved me, but Mom's love and my self-awareness combined to inspire me to shoot for better behavior. Maybe God's deep love reveals where we have lived with less than love and maybe that begins justice and wholeness? Maybe God's Perfect love will one day enfold us and simultaneously look in our eyes and we will know where we offered less than love even as Love restores us as beloved? “On the other hand” as we consider love and forgiveness, we must remember that injustice is not to be overlooked. Love requires justice to bring about wholeness and restoration. In Acts 4, Peter and John will be put on trial for demanding an accounting of Jesus' murder!

So we have these snapshots of God's love, images and ideas like creation, the cross, easter, pentecost or the parable of the prodigal son. These stories help us live into God's love. First John calls us to perfect our Love: “The love of God is truly perfected in whoever keeps Christ's word, by living in the same way as Jesus lived.” We need these stories of Jesus deeply embedded in our living to know what love is. We need to be reading the Gospels so often that what Jesus did and taught becomes our default response in life. Do you remember those “What Would Jesus Do” bracelets they were popular a decade or so back? That's a pretty good question: “What **did** Jesus do”? As Christians, we need the teachings and stories of Jesus to see how to love.

Friends, perhaps the Bible gives us love stories instead of a definition of love because love is to be our life story and work. Love is God's oldest and yet always our freshest commandment. Love God with all your heart, your mind, and all your working and Love neighbors, strangers, and (the master class loving enemies), even as you love yourself. (Matt 5 & 22) I think when I know a definition I feel a certain smugness. When we think we know something, certainty often ends our seeking. But mysteries pull us to investigate, explore, and go deeper. Our life's work demands more than a formula. Maybe our life mission is an unfolding application of God's Love through us. Maybe seeking to Love to God, love myself and Love others is a worthwhile use of God's gift of this life. Maybe, there are no glossaries in the Bible because we are called to spend our lives figuring out how to love ourselves, love God and love neighbors.

So hear this blessing from 1 John "May the Love of God be perfected in us, as we seek to keep Christ's word, by living in the same way that Jesus lived". May Love become the story of our lives- defining each of us. Amen.