

Love is a Person

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As today's Advent candle is celebrating Love, I thought I would take some time to explore exactly what love is. After all, how do you define a word that can be used in so many ways? "I love you." "I love ice cream." "I'd love to go." I ran across a few descriptions of love as defined by some kids in Britain. One older boy described love as deep affection and sexual attraction, to which his little sister, sitting next to him, said, "Ewww!" Another little boy said this: "When you get love, it's a girl normally. And girls are annoying. So it's basically stupid."

Adults come up with some equally silly lines. "I love you more than chocolate, and that's saying a lot." "My love for you is like a Wi-Fi signal—strong and often interrupted." "You're the cheese to my macaroni, the peanut butter to my jelly, and the other half of my sandwich." "Love means never having to say, 'Who ate my fries?'" Or here's a favorite: "Love is like a walk in the park....Jurassic Park."

I checked how AI might define love: "Love is a complex mix of emotions and behaviors, involving strong affection, care, trust, intimacy, and commitment, expressed through support and deep connection for another person, animal, or even an idea, with scientific views pointing to brain chemicals like dopamine and biological drives, while philosophy and personal experience highlight it as a practice of unselfish concern, devotion, and a unique, individual journey of growth and belonging."

Well, that's probably a good summary of what the world thinks of love. But how do we grasp what love is as Christians – especially at this time of Christmas, when we celebrate the coming of Christ? I'm passionately convinced that love is far more than any of these definitions. We heard quoted during the advent candle lighting John 3:16, "For God so loved the world." To really understand love, we must look to God, and to His gift to us, which is Himself – Christ our Lord and Savior.

So I thought I would look at how God is described to us, especially as the second person of the Trinity, Jesus. We heard from Nehemiah this morning about the stiff-necked Hebrews on their way from Egypt to the promised land under Moses' leadership. They saw all kinds of wonderful things that God did for them – parting

the Red Sea, manna from heaven, water from a rock. Yet they still were rebellious and fickle with God. What does Nehemiah say about who God is in response? Is He angry, bitter, looking for revenge? No! “But you are a God ready to forgive, gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, and did not forsake them.” Abounding in steadfast love – love that never changes, and demonstrated through His wonderful forgiveness, His grace and mercy, His unwillingness to be angry. Now that sounds like a love that I would like to have, as I go about life in my own stiff-necked way. Aren’t we a stubborn lot, much like those Israelites were thousands of years ago? This is the kind of God we need so desperately, as we are in need of forgiveness, grace and mercy every day of every year.

As we look at how Jesus is described in the New Testament, we begin to get an even clearer picture. One of the first descriptions that became very important to the early church is that of the Good Shepherd. This is the person who is willing to lay down His life for His flock, for His charges. The hireling will run when the lion comes to kill and devour, but the Good Shepherd will do anything to protect His sheep from harm. The Good Shepherd will even risk all, even the rest of the flock to seek and save one who is lost. Jesus is also the Door of the sheep, the one who stands in the gap in the wall where the sheep can come and go. He is the One who protects while his charges sleep.

Jesus is also the Way, the Truth and the Life. He is the only bridge between humanity and God – flawless and sure. Our very lives have their foundation in Him. He is also the Word of God. Yes, we can point to our bibles and say that they are the word of God. And in a way, they are. But the true Word is Jesus. Don’t ever forget that. If you read a passage in the Bible that mentions the Word of God, first apply it to Jesus rather than the Bible. John tells us in the beginning of his gospel that Jesus, as the Word, both co-existed with God and is God. All that has been made, including us, was made by Him and through Him.

In short, all of these things point right back to love. Yes, love. The Shepherd, the Door, the Way, the Word – these all point to love. So this is my definition of the word love. It is the person of Jesus. Let me repeat that – Jesus Christ Himself is not only the definition and picture of what love is, He is actually love itself.

I have said before, and I stand by this, that God is love, and everything I read or hear about God is seen through that lens – that He is love. I only read even the Bible with that outlook leading and directing me.

Let's do an experiment to check this out. Most of us are familiar with the "love" chapter in First Corinthians 13. We heard some of that read this morning. Everywhere the word 'love' appears, put in the name of Jesus, and see if it rings true. Let's try it:

Jesus is patient and kind; Jesus does not envy or boast; He is not arrogant or rude. He does not insist on His own way; He is not irritable or resentful; He does not rejoice at wrongdoing, but rejoices with the truth. Jesus bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Jesus never ends.

It holds together, right? It works elsewhere, too: "See what kind of love – Jesus – the Father has given to us, that we should be called children of God; and so we are." "By this we know love – Jesus, that he laid down his life for us, and we ought to lay down our lives for the brothers." How could it not be more clear to us? Christ is the person of love.

So what does this mean for us? If Christ is love – and He is – then our experience of Christ now becomes something astonishing beyond belief. Listen now and begin to understand the nature of the real gift of Christmas to us; this Christ child that we can know and experience for ourselves. I can attest to this, as I have had just the tiniest of tastes of Him as love. "Taste and see that the Lord is good!" Let's look at just a few of the many ways that we can live in Him, in this kind of love.

We know by faith that Christ dwells in our hearts, in our inmost selfhood. He is always there; He never leaves you. His Holy Spirit strengthens and empowers us. Now it's really easy to give some level of acknowledgment to this and leave it there. Particularly as Presbyterians, we tend to shy away from anything emotionally profound. I would like to challenge us to a higher, a more intimate level of experiencing Christ as love.

Paul, in our passage today from Ephesians, prays that we will "know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, that (we) may be filled with all the fullness of

God.” Paul calls us to comprehend and experience the vastness of what it means to be rooted and grounded in love. He speaks of the breadth, the length, the height and the depth of God’s love in Christ. Those words sound big, right? But we don’t know really HOW big! Breadth is translated from the word *platos*, which carries with it the meaning of GREAT extent. Length comes from the Greek word *mēkos*, which comes from a root word of *megos*. Great and large – where we get the word or prefix mega. And we know what we mean when we call something “mega,” right? Let’s go to the word translated height – *hypsos*. It has a connotation of being high and exalted, like God Himself, like the heavens above. It is derived from the word that we get hyper from – exceeding, above, more than, beyond, exceedingly abundantly. Are you getting the picture yet? Depth – from the Greek word *bathos*. Like the word bathysphere, a submarine designed to go to the deepest depths of the sea. There is no deeper that one can go. Great and large, spreading far beyond horizon to horizon, higher than any spacecraft can go, deeper than any watercraft. So big that the universe itself is just a tiny speck next to it.

We are called to experience Christ as love, far beyond any capability of knowledge or understanding. We will spend an eternity trying to grasp it, and there will always be more! To be filled with the fullness of God – unimaginably vast, yet present in our beings. It’s a wonder that we don’t just explode! I have shared before my experience of Christ’s love so intense that I had to ask for it to stop, because I felt I would disintegrate otherwise.

Christianity is not some perfunctory, ritualistic thing. It is not packageable. It’s funny, because when we have a special experience of God, of the love of Christ, it makes us want to repeat whatever we were doing to get it again. Sing this song; pray this prayer; and be sure to do it in order. This is just dancing around the periphery of the Christian life. Sure, we don’t always feel the amazing rush of God’s presence, but we have available to us the absolute visceral experience of Christ and love. It is something that hits us in the gut, becomes intuitive, even primitive, primal or instinctual.

We are made up of three parts – spirit, soul and body. Our bodies are the physical flesh we see and touch. Our souls are our thoughts and emotions, who we are. And our spirits are the essence of each of our lives, where God can first

touch us. Yet each of these portions of our being are able to experience Christ as love. God joins His Spirit, His Holy Spirit to our spirits – that is part of what it means to be born again. Our spirits are reborn, united with Christ. From there love can begin to gush from one part of us to the next. Our thoughts become attuned to Christ, as we mold our minds to Him. Our emotions begin to tell us of the joys, the riches, the unimaginable experience of Christ love. And then our bodies can respond, feeling that deep visceral experience in our bones, blood and flesh. Take the physical experience of love that you had the first time you truly fell in love with someone. Now multiply that by infinity! That is how far the experience of Christ as love can take you.

Like I mentioned a little earlier, what a Christmas gift Jesus is to us! As we celebrate by giving to others, by showing our love and appreciation to others, let it be a reflection of the far deeper love that is Christ within us.

I have taken the liberty of doing my own translation of Ephesians 3:19, the last part of today's passage:

And continually knowing the selfless love of Christ which exceeds any stretch of knowledge we could possibly reach, that you may be full to the brim, totally complete, in the unimaginable fullness of God.

Wow! That is what the Christian life is all about. Let yourself be open to experiencing every last wonderful drop of it!

Have a Merry Christmas and know the joy of the love of Christ.

Amen