

**Focus:** God calls us into his covenant of love.

If you've ever felt like you and your significant other are speaking different languages, maybe you are—according to Gary Chapman, whose book *The 5 Love Languages* Nikki and I were assigned to read for premarital counseling. The book describes how each of us communicates and receives love in different ways. The five so-called “love languages” Chapman identifies are *words of affirmation, quality time together, acts of service, receiving gifts, and physical touch*. Expressing love through one “language,” may be completely lost on your spouse if they understand love in a different way. Early in the book he writes,

Your emotional love language and the language of your spouse may be as different as Chinese from English. No matter how hard you try to express love in English, if your spouse understands only Chinese, you will never understand how to love each other. My friend on the plane was speaking the language of affirming words to his third wife when he said, “I told her how beautiful she was. I told her I loved her. I told her how proud I was to be her husband.” He was speaking love, and he was sincere, but she did not understand his language. Perhaps she was looking for love in his behavior and didn't see it. Being sincere is not enough. We must be willing to learn our spouse's primary love language if we are to be effective communicators of love. <sup>1</sup>

Lent is about love. But not just any love. Love in our most important relationship: our relationship with God. This love is like a beautiful marriage covenant, a covenant made possible, called into being by Jesus's great love for us on the cross. But a marriage covenant involves two sides. On our side, this relationship is characterized by the words of the “double-love command”: “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.... You shall love your neighbor as yourself (Mt 22:37, 39).”

All of us are here because we love God and want to love him more. That's a great start for this Lenten season! The question is: how does that love get expressed? Are we speaking God's love language?

That was the question the prophet Isaiah was putting before the Israelites in tonight's reading. The people of Israel don't get what's going on. They have knelt before God in devout disciplines of prayer and fasting. They clearly do love God! But it doesn't seem to be working. They are still stuck in exile in faraway Babylon: no king, no Temple, they aren't much of a nation to speak of anymore. And they complain, ““Why do we fast, but you do not see? Why humble ourselves, but you do not notice?”

Answer: They are speaking the wrong love language. It's not that God doesn't see or doesn't notice the fasting. It's just not the love that is most important to God. The way to God's heart? The prophet answers:

“Is not this the fast that I choose:  
to loose the bonds of injustice,  
to undo the thongs of the yoke,

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<sup>1</sup> Gary Chapman, *The 5 Love Languages: The Secret to Love That Lasts* (Chicago: Northfield, 1992), 15.

to let the oppressed go free,  
and to break every yoke?  
"Is it not to share your bread with the hungry,  
and bring the homeless poor into your house;  
when you see the naked, to cover them,  
and not to hide yourself from your own kin?"

I suspect the answer is the same in our time. If ever in our lifetimes our country has seen the need in our society for God's grace, healing, and renewal, it is this last year. This pandemic has laid bare many of the shortcomings, inequalities, and silent cruelties that we have too often looked away from when things were well with the rest of us. There are many ways that we could address these problems: political, legal, scientific, medical solutions. These all have to be a part of how we repent as individuals and as a nation. But the most fundamental way that we Christians can repent, can turn around, can start anew is by recommitting to our love, our marriage covenant with God. Ashes, giving up chocolate, if they help get us in the right mindset for this great work, then they are a fine beginning. But how about the things Isaiah described? Breaking the bonds of injustice, letting the oppressed go free, breaking every yoke, sharing our bread, housing the homeless, clothing the naked, coming to the aid of our brothers and sisters in time of need? Now you're speaking God's language.

Throughout this time of Lent, we'll be paying special attention to the Old Testament readings. Every week, we will hear of God coming to God's people in love and in covenant. We will wind up with the new covenant made with us at the Last Supper and the cross, a new covenant summed up with a new commandment, "Love one other as I have first loved you (Jn 13:34)." In a world plagued by so many words of hate, can we recommit ourselves this Lent to our covenant with God? To hear and speak God's language of love to all the world. **Amen.**