

What Is Love?

John 15:12-17

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It is good to be back with you after three Sundays absent. I was attending the Yale Writers' Conference and had a delightful time. One of the biggest surprises of the trip occurred on Pentecost Sunday, when I chose to attend worship at Center Church On-the-Green, the historic UCC congregation that sits in the middle of the New Haven green. Shortly after I sat down in the pew, as I was reading over the bulletin, a man walked up to shake my hand and say, "Welcome to New Haven." As I looked up, it was our own Bruce Garver. He and Karen had walked in behind me. It truly is a small world when you can cross half a continent and go to church with the same people you see every Sunday. Bruce and Karen had been members of that church forty years before, and Bruce had been the moderator. So, it makes sense that they would be there on their vacation, but it was a surprise that we were in the same place, because there were other UCC choices, including United Church which sits only about 100 yards away from Center Church. 300 years ago there was a fight in the congregation and those who left built their church right next door. Bruce was glad that I had sided with the right folk in my selection of which church to attend.

The day I left town was actually my fifth wedding anniversary. I think Michael was okay with that because that evening he had his major annual fundraiser for work, so we wouldn't have been able to celebrate that night anyway. He may not have been too pleased with a seventeen day delay in our celebration, however.

June, of course, is wedding season. I realize now that as a minister maybe I should have chosen another month to get married in, because sometimes I've had to celebrate someone else's wedding on the weekend that otherwise I'd be celebrating my own.

June is a good time to think about marriage. And much has changed about marriage and relationships in recent decades, and not just the historic legal victories of same-sex couples. These days almost every couple I marry has lived together for years. Researchers point out that not only are more people marrying later, but that marriage rates are now higher among the more educated and the more affluent and that those marriages are more likely to last longer. Of course the high divorce rates in our culture have been a feature of the last thirty or forty years.

A sexual revolution began in American culture in the 1960's, partially a factor of growing economic opportunity and political equality for women. Also the advent of the birth control pill and new antibiotics.

According to some studies, young adults date less often now, but are having more sex. Though other researchers have disputed those findings.

But it isn't just marriage and sex which have changed, so have families. The nuclear family of the middle twentieth century was always something of an historical aberration. These

days families are incredibly diverse, spread out geographically, and often inclusive of folk not genetically related to you. It was the gay community which developed the concept of “families of choice,” which has been adopted more broadly. These days many people will count as family their closest friends, an elderly neighbor, or people they go to church with. It’s likely that many of us spend our holidays with people who don’t share our genes.

What does the contemporary Christian church, then, have to say about things like sex, marriage, family, and friendship? And about the practices, the disciplines, and the virtues that sustain and strengthen our relationships, things like celebration, humility, forgiveness, generosity, delight, and courage? Responding to those questions is the task I’ve set myself for this summer, and I’m calling this series “The Work of Love.”

The title comes to me from a Wendell Berry poem, the one read earlier in the service. Berry, you’ll remember, is my favourite poet. He is also a Kentucky farmer, farming the same land that his father and his grandfather farmed before him.

This particular poem comes from his book *A Timbered Choir*. That book is a collection of poems he wrote on Sunday mornings after walking through the woods and over the fields on and near his farm. It was his communion with God in nature that spurred his thinking and inspired his writing. Often the poems reflect on his marriage, as this one does, recognizing his 35th anniversary. In the closing lines of the poem, we read:

where we know
we are, even as we do,
the work of love.

It seems to me that this “work of love” he speaks of is threefold. First, it is the work of farming. Berry farms in the old ways of his father and grandfather, believing that it is his responsibility to God, nature, and other people to be a good steward of the land he has been given responsibility for. Therefore he tends the soil, wanting to leave it better and richer than he found it. He nurtures the woods and the native flora and fauna. He works to keep the creek water clean and pure.

These old ways of farming are difficult work, but they are also loving work. And Berry understands that they are metaphors for the other work he must do in his life, including the work of his marriage, which is the second meaning of the “work of love.” One of the biggest surprises to me, after five years of marriage, is how much work marriage is. I’m a rather independent and even stubborn person, so adjusting everything to accommodate another person is still something I’m working on. Some of you who have been married far longer than me, inform me that it remains hard work.

But just as with the farming, this work of love is also good work and holy work, bearing much fruit.

The final way that Berry means the “work of love,” is about God and God’s role in nature. As Berry meanders through fields and leaps across creeks, he hears the birds singing and the frogs croaking and watches the leaves changing colors with the season. In all of this he sees the love of God at work, and that love becomes the source from which Berry draws in order to carry out his own work—on the farm and in his marriage.

So, this work of love isn't just what we do, it is what we are, who we are becoming. This work is the result, as he says at the opening of the poem, of a choice, a decision, made without foresight but rooted in our love for another. It is a commitment that we make to one another, a commitment that we hope will be sustained. It flows from our central being, who we are. And it is this territory which we will be inhabiting the rest of this summer.

The best place to begin, it seems to me, is with the big question, "What is Love?"
And, yes, all week the Haddaway song of the same name has been stuck in my head:

What is love?
Baby, don't hurt me
Don't hurt me no more

But that lyric doesn't have much of an answer for us. Instead, I turned to my favourite theologian, James McClendon, who answers this question in his systematic theology. Love is three different, interrelated things. Before I get to all of those, I first want to say something about a misunderstanding that the church has often promulgated. Much has been made of the different Greek words for love—agape, eros, philia, and I can never remember the fourth one. Some theologians in the twentieth century, including C. S. Lewis, made clear distinctions between those saying that there were four different types of love. However, more recently many scholars have disagreed with those distinctions. In the ancient Greek there may be nuances to certain words, but they can be used interchangeably and fade into one another. Even agape is used in Greek to describe sexual love, not just divine love. In Greek as in English and also in Hebrew the term love is broad and inclusive of many different kinds of loving. Back, then to McClendon's three things that answer the question, "What is love?"

First, love is a feeling. If I asked you to share the story of your first kiss, I'm sure you could. Remember the innocence and the thrill. Or how about some time when someone special told you that they loved you. Or you told them. How did you feel when your children were born? Or when you first held your adopted child? Or when you saw a friend whom you hadn't seen in many years?

Love is feeling, but it is also an achievement, as philosopher Alva Noë wrote in an article for NPR's Cosmos and Culture blog in 2010, "Love is an achieved openness" and a learned behavior, much like learning to read. It requires that we come to see and to know another person, and that seeing and that knowing take time and work.

McClendon calls this love as a virtue. If the feelings of love are to continue and to develop over time, then love must become a habit, part of our character, developed through deliberately chosen actions.

Now, often in Western culture, in the romantic myth of love that has dominated our thinking for almost a thousand years, love is passion "understood as deprivation and yearning," which, once found, is often temporary and tragic. The greatest of loves often lead to death. Think of Tristan and Isolde or Rome and Juliet. And even in the romantic films we all enjoy, love is this longing for something that is difficult to find.

The Christian love story, however, says something different. We believe that love is a gift. It is what Jesus tells us in today's gospel lesson. Here is McClendon's summary of the

Christian love story:

A God who is the very Ground of Adventure, the Weaver of society's Web, the Holy Source of nature in its concreteness—the one and only God, who, when time began, began to be God for a world that in its orderly constitution finally came by his will and choice to include also—ourselves. We human beings, having our natural frame and basis, with our own (it seemed our own) penchant for community, and (it seemed) our own hankering after adventure, found ourselves, before long, in trouble. Our very adventurousness led us astray; our drive to cohesion fostered monstrous imperial alternatives to the adventure and the sociality of the Way God had intended, while our continuity with nature became an excuse to despise ourselves and whatever was the cause of us. We sin. In his loving concern, God set among us, by every means infinite wisdom could propose, the foundations of a new human society; in his patience he sent messengers to recall the people of his Way to their way; in the first bright glimmers of opportunity he sent—himself, incognito, without splendor and fanfare, the Maker amid the things made, the fundamental Web as if a single fiber, the Ground of Adventure risking everything in this adventure. His purpose—sheer love; his means—pure faith; his promise—unquenchable hope. In that love he lived a life of love; by that faith he died a faithful death; from that death he rose to fructify hope for the people of his Way, newly gathered, newly equipped. The rest of the story is still his—yet it can also be ours, yours. That is the fundamental love story of the Christian faith.

And the central theme of that story is gift. God freely and graciously giving to the world and to us. Love isn't primarily a longing for what is difficult to achieve. It is giving of ourselves to others even as God has given to us. Let me read another quote from McClendon:

[Love] is God's gift, the gift that is ever present, breaking down our so carefully enacted barriers of race and class and caste, melting our resistance to the ongoing of the generations, overcoming (while life shall last) our destructive and self-destructive urges, welding us together in a unity that (if God's love be true) death itself cannot destroy. As gift it returns to the giver; God *is* love, and to the extent that we love (who would narrow the sense of the term here?), to that extent we abide in God, and [God] in us.

What is love? Love is feeling, Love is virtue, Love is gift. And God is love. To the extent that we love, we become part of God. And so the work of love that we engage in—sex with our partners, nurturing our children, caring for our parents, celebrating with our friends—all of this is also the work of drawing closer to God, becoming more like God, being a part of God. For it is also God working through us, giving of God's self to us.

All of this is what we will be exploring this summer, as we live out the teaching of Jesus in today's gospel "Love one another as I have loved you."