

At Home in God's Love
John 15:9-17
May 9, 2021

When I was a teenager I had free access to three movie theatres in my town. My father's barber shop advertised the films playing each week and for that he received free passes to each movie. I saw most films made in the 50's. One of these was a romantic classic called, **Love is a Many-Splendored thing**. I still vividly remember how enchanted I was with watching the romance between William Holden and Jenifer Jones. The song brings back vivid memories of how emotionally compelling this film was to me a young teen. Hard to imagine, right! But to be honest it melted my heart. Here are the lyrics:

**Love is a many splendored thing
It's the April rose
That only grows in the early spring
Love is nature's way of giving
A reason to believe in
The golden crown that makes a man, a king
Once on a high and windy hill
In the morning mist
Two lovers kissed and the world stood still
Then your fingers touched my silent heart
And taught it how to sing...**

Love is a powerful word in our language and a powerful idea that has increasingly influenced our culture over the past century. Especially through film and television. Love today is most often described in emotional and sentimental terms.

And if there is any day that we celebrate love, other than St. Valentine's Day in February, it is this day we set aside for Mothers. This is a different kind of love from the many love ballads that have become so popular over the past decades, but it is still a love that reaches each one of us. Lots of cards, gifts, lunches, and family gatherings-well probably not this year! Mothers will be recognized for their sacrifices and their dedication to the family. However imperfect our mother's love might have been for each of us, today we

remember and treasure our mothers and all the memories of their care for us as children and adults.

I watched the video of Celine Dion singing, "My Heart will go on" from the 2007 DVD "Live In Las Vegas - A New Day". It's the theme song from the movie Titanic. It became her signature song, selling over 18 million records. Here are some of the lyrics:

**Near, far, wherever you are
I believe that the heart does go on
Once more you open the door
And you're here in my heart
And my heart will go on and on**

**Love can touch us one time
And last for a lifetime
And never let go till we're gone**

Beautiful isn't it! Love is celebrated as an emotional feeling between lovers. It celebrates the fact that love is seen as a matter of the heart over the head or will. Every day we listen to tales of so and so is in love or out of love with his girlfriend/boyfriend. Prominent banker, politician, movie star, indeed people from all walks of life, are in the news constantly because love has burned them. Where would the music industry be without love? It is the subject of most of our popular songs. It seems love and our need for it is written into our DNA.

All of this, however, is miles removed from the love that is at the heart of the New Testament. John's Gospel makes clear that a different kind of love is at the centre of the universe. God has shown this different love to the Son. John reminds us: **God so loved the world...** (3:16). John reminds us that true love originates in the very being of God and is expressed most powerfully in our Lord's life, death and resurrection.

In other words, love in the bible is an active word; it moves God to do something to resolve the human situation. Love is a verb, in other words, not mere sentiment. God's love expresses itself through an act of will not of emotion. But in Western Culture it is. And the past century shifted this balance even further toward emotion and

sentiment. You see this in the growth of love songs and films celebrating love as eros.

But for the bible love can never be reduced to emotion. In his innermost being, John tells us, **God is love**. This is who God is. We may have all sorts of confused notions of what God is like, but we won't go too far wrong if we begin with love. I like to picture God as a gentle, loving Spirit whose nurture of creation is like a mother caring for her children. Remember Jesus remark as he looked over Jerusalem: **How often I've longed to gather your children, gather your children like a hen, her brood safe under her wings—but you refused and turned away! (Luke 13:34, The Message)**. Picture God as a great mother hen longing to gather her little, defenseless chicks under her wing. That is a powerful image of God that is just as central to the biblical portrait as the God who thunders from Mount Sinai.

Jesus teaches the new way of being human that flows out of his example and sacrifice. He tells us: **Make yourselves at home in my love. If you keep my commands, you'll remain intimately at home in my love. That's what I've done—kept my Father's commands and made myself at home in his love. (John 15:9-10 The Message)**

Many years ago I read C.S.Lewis' little book, *The Four Loves*. Lewis outlines four types of love: **affection, friendship, erotic love, and the agape love of God**. Based on the different loves described in Greek thought, Lewis looks at familial or affectionate love (**storge**); friendship (**philia**); romantic love (**eros**); and spiritual love (**agape**) in the light of Christian thinking. Each of these types of love is legitimate and healthy in human relationships. But Lewis argues that ultimately it will be healthier for us if we engage in each of these loves through the prism of agape love.

Part of our profound problem today in society is our willingness to pursue well-being through the first three types of love without any reference to agape love which is the highest type of love. Isolated from faith and love of God our pursuit of friendship, eros, and affection, has distorted our relationships and often left us frustrated and alone.

The path to human health and well being outlined in Jesus' teaching here and throughout the New Testament is found in a depth relationship with God. Being at home in God's love is never viewed as a merely emotional experience. It is always viewed in the context of obedience and willing compliance to God's will. While we may squirm a bit when discipline enters our discussion of love, it is central to Jesus' teaching. Living our lives within God's love is much more demanding than mere feelings. It demands acts of will toward God and others.

My translation of verse 12: **This is my command in order that you may love one another just as I loved you.** The one little Greek word used here, *iva*, means, *in order that*, not simply *that*. This is not a commandment to love. It is rather asking us to follow his example and do the sort of things Jesus did (for example washing the disciples' feet in the upper room) so that we express this love of neighbour.

If we are to be at home in God's love, we are to follow Jesus' example of how he treated his neighbour. We must comport ourselves toward others in society, in our families, in all of our social interactions, as Jesus did in his society. In other words, this spiritual love is expressed through acts of the will: acts of kindness, generosity, empathy, sympathy, and support for the sick, imprisoned and weak. And by doing so we will love one another. We are not forced to love one another as if it was Jesus' command. Rather by living out his way of life toward others we express that agape love to others.

His attitude to women, to organized religion, to those on the fringes of society and to the outsiders in general: Jesus rocked the boat with his actions and attitude toward the status quo of his day. He upset the religious authorities, the political establishment, and the smug satisfaction of the rich and powerful. In short, by following his example we essentially keep his commandments; this draws us into acts of sacrificial love and kindness toward those in need. Being in the circle of God's love is to live within the flow of God's acts of redemption and God desire to build the new realm of love on earth.

On this Mother's Day let's express our appreciation for our mothers who nourished our young lives and provided support and love for us as adults. Love, and hopefully this is what we have learned afresh today, is grounded in the love of God. Out of this spiritual connection, our lives hold the promise of genuine joy and purpose. Since love is ultimately a verb, then let us love others through our actions. This opens to us a life of joy and meaning. Jesus teaches us: **I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete.**

Amen