

“Heart Throb”

I John 3:18-22; 4:16b-21; John 13:34-35

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Mary Taylor Memorial United Methodist Church, Milford, Connecticut

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Remember your first love? That first girl or guy that got your pulse racing? I do! I imagine you do, too! Sometimes it was true love: I’ve heard many stories over the years of first loves that were also true loves. For others that first “heart throb” was a portal to learning about human intimacy, physical and spiritual. We loved, we got hurt or hurt others, hopefully grew and matured, and after a bit became a bit more human, a bit more compassionate, a bit kinder than we had been before.

Today’s scriptures speak the language of love. It is language of the heart, surely; but also of mind and strength: *“Little children, let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action.”* Again: *“This is his commandment, that we should believe in the name of his Son Jesus Christ and love one another, just as he has commanded us.* Again: *“God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them.”* Finally: *“I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another.”*

Now you’ve heard this love stuff before right? So let me tell you where I am going. Then you won’t have to wonder “Are we there yet?” You’ll know when we arrive at this destination: *“By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.”*

From time to time I believe we need to remember this call to love; to remember that we are loved by God; and to know it leads to our responsibility to love others. Receiving God’s self-giving love in Jesus Christ and living it out in community is not a “once and for all” proposition. It is a daily commitment that, according to today’s Gospel (John 13:34-35) is a love that is a commandment.

But what do we mean by “love?” I love God, running, pasta, my car, my dad, my brothers, my wife, my sons—all four of them—my ministry and my church. The English language allows me the

indiscretion of using the very same word—love—to mean very different things!

Greek, especially New Testament Greek, is more precise. More importantly, it resonates with our experience. In his book, The Four Loves, C.S. Lewis observes four kinds of loves. *Storge* is affection, fondness through familiarity, as we might have for family. *Philia* is friendship, that voluntary love we bestow on another and they on us, usually by shared interest or activity. *Eros* is romantic love, sexual love. This is the love we associate with “being in love,” sometimes even to the point of refusal to part, as in Romeo and Juliet.

I mentioned before we can probably all remember our first heart throb. We can also remember when our heart didn't throb. Because it was broken. Because of sin—ours or someone else's—nearly all of us can remember a time when affection, friendship or romance was ignored, betrayed or thrown away like so much trash. At times like those there is an impulse, self-protecting yet ultimately self-destroying, to vow “*I'll never trust/love/cherish anyone again.*” If that is you, today or in a time gone by that still poisons you, hear what Lewis says:

“There is no safe investment. To love at all is to be vulnerable. Love anything, and your heart will certainly be wrung and possibly be broken. If you want to make sure of keeping it intact, you must give your heart to no one, not even to an animal. Wrap it carefully round with hobbies and little luxuries; avoid all entanglements; lock it up safe in the casket or coffin of your selfishness. But in that casket - safe, dark, motionless, airless - it will change. It will not be broken; it will become unbreakable, impenetrable, irredeemable. The alternative to tragedy, or at least to the risk of tragedy, is damnation. The only place outside Heaven where you can be perfectly safe from all the dangers and perturbations of love is Hell.” — [C.S. Lewis, The Four Loves](#)

Did I mention that C.S. Lewis wasn't shy?

Those who have been counting know that I have only mentioned three loves; and those familiar with these passages and these loves know the one that is missing. The word “love” that appeared in today's readings is not *storge*, *philia* or *eros*. It is *agape*. It is to have a willed

concern for the well-being of another. It is to make an intentional decision for the well-being of another. It is sometimes translated as “charity,” although that is unfortunate because “charity” to modern ears means “hand-outs.” The Latin, “caritas,” as we will sing in a few moments, has this same rich meaning as the Greek “agape” and is one of the three traditional virtues, along with “faith” and “hope.” What it has in common with them, and with our experience, is that it is counter-intuitive. It seems to go against the human impulse of self-interest. Why would I put the well-being of another before my own? If I put your well-being ahead of mine, won’t I end up the loser?

Maybe. As Lewis observed in the earlier quote, love and you take your chances.

But what isn’t in that quote—Lewis gets to it later—and what the scriptures and the life of Jesus make abundantly clear; and what happens to you in the church if you hang around Christians long enough; is that you experience God’s love. Some experience it in the miraculous moment when they are saved, spiritually, and heart and life are awakened to the magnificent power of God’s love. Some experience it in the miraculous moment when they are saved, physically, from death; and held on this earth for a purpose that God beckons they discover. And some experience it through you. Yes, you. And me. As the prayer book describes us: “*a sheep of God’s own fold; a lamb of God’s own flock; a sinner of God’s own redeeming.*” Yet channels of love.

It’s a pretty amazing thing, this *agape* love of God. It’s why—or I hope it’s why—we run a Community Supper once a month and run, literally, for Beth-el Center as some of us did yesterday. It’s why we collect food and knit prayer shawls and repair houses and hold people in prayer and visit the sick. We love, because God first loved us. Speaking of visiting the sick, I want to ask your help. Some of you know that our Caring Ministry, that meets today, has worked hard to care for all our people. Don Hastings keeps track of nearly 30 people who are home-bound or in skilled care. Pastor Vink and I, along with eight known laity, visit regularly. Since July 15 a notice “Contacting the Pastors” tells

how to reach us. Yet I still sometimes learn about our sick and homebound from someone other than the family. More importantly, at times I receive concerns implying a lack of care from the church—which means me and our team—when, in fact, families have been contacted but other family members don't know and the assumption is a pastoral failure than a breakdown in family communication. Do we get it right all the time? Of course not! But we want to. So the help I ask from you is this: if you know of someone sick or homebound or in need of a visit who has not had one and wants one, please tell me, Pastor Vink or any member of the pastoral care team whose names will appear in the Church Conference booklet this Tuesday. If you'd like to join or learn about us, come to today's Noon meeting. As important: when you hear of pastoral need, ask people to call me at church or on my cell both numbers published each week. I guarantee we will respond.

Indeed, we must! Because we are called to make a difference in people's spiritual lives! Those of us who have been touched by the self-giving, self-emptying, self-sacrificing *agape* love of God—which is us here, or we wouldn't be here—are called to share that love to make a difference of others. Some of you know I have questions. I do, and I trust heaven is where they'll get answered. But I also have certainties, and one of them is the love of God for us. That love moves us. It moves us from the uncertainty of questions we cannot answer to the certainty of answers we cannot escape. And some of those answers, my friends, are you, people who have made a difference in the spiritual lives of others, as Marquise will tell you in a few moments.

“Heart Cards” arrived in most homes this past Tuesday by regular mail. You were invited to answer the question “Who has made a difference in your spiritual life?” Please post them and read them on the board in Dodd Hall. And let heart throb of God's love shine through you. As we will sing in our last hymn today:

**So in a hundred names, each day we all can meet
a presence, sensed and shown at work, at home, or in the street.
Yet every name we see, shines in a brighter sun:
In Christ alone is Love full grown and life and hope begun.** Hymn 111, vs. 4