

St. Christopher's Episcopal Church
The Rev. Cara Spaccarelli
Sermon 1 John 4:7-21

"Love makes your soul crawl out from its hiding place."
–*Zora Neale Hurston*

"Lots of people want to ride with you in the limo, but what you want is someone who will take the bus with you when the limo breaks down."
– *Oprah Winfrey*

"You drew stars around my scars."
–*Taylor Swift*

It is a challenge to talk in a fresh way about love. To crack through our connotations, preconceived notions, even baggage when it comes to the concept of love. Let's just say that love has accrued a lot of expectations. Someone you love is supposed to understand you, care for you, forgive you, fulfill you, and on and on, and of course you for them. And depending on how you are feeling about the supposedly loving relationships in your life right now, when someone starts talking about love, in this case, myself, you have that lens affecting what you hear.

The writers of the New Testament faced a similar challenge. How to talk about God's love in a world filled with its own ideas about love that aren't so consistent with what God's love is? The way they addressed that challenge was by taking the eight words that ancient Greek had for love – the New Testament was written in Greek – and using the word that was used the least frequently – agape. The word – agape – is first used at the time of Plato, 400 years before Jesus. But it is used so little that scholars don't really know what meaning of love it carried before the New Testament writers got a hold of it. Which is what made it so ripe for them to infuse this word with the distinctiveness of God's love.

The first letter of John is the book of the Bible that talks most directly about God's love. Looking at just this passage, agape love is described as

Sacrificial, Life-giving

Starts with God

The way we see God

The way we know we abide in God and God in us.

Needless to say, agape love is pretty important to this life with God endeavor that we are all on.

And that's even before we get to the last challenging verse in this passage: "those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also."

Understanding God's love is pretty important or perhaps it is better to say that experiencing God's love is pretty important. Understanding it, probably out of our reach, but the experience of God's love becomes more understandable when we find words or images to describe it, and they are often ones that are known, but not as common that break open this meaning.

Just like the early church's New Testament writers, today's Bible translators seek to find the right word in a culture's language to break open a concept essential to the Christian faith. It is why it often takes so long to truly translate a book of the Bible into another language; one translator told me it isn't unusual for it to take 20 years to really get a good version of one gospel book in another language. But the work is worth it, and you never know when you'll have a break-through.

A Bible translator working among the Hdi people in northern Cameroon in Africa tells this story of his work. He had learned that the verbs in the Hdi language consistently have three forms, ending in either i, a, or u (make the sounds), each different ending changed the meaning of the word kind of like, but not exactly like, a verb tense of past, present, and future. The word for love though only had two forms - dvi and dva, but not dvu. So he consulted the committee of native-speaking Christian elders to understand it better. “ Could you dvi your wife?” he asked. Yes, they said, that means that you loved your wife but that the love was now gone. “Could you dva your wife?” Yes, they said, that means you love your wife as long as she remains a good wife, faithful and caring of her husband. “Could you dvu your wife?” Everyone laughed. Of course not, they said, If you said that, you would have to keep on loving your wife no matter what she did, even if she never got you water and never made you meals. Even if she cheated on you, you would be compelled to keep loving her. We’d never say dvu. The translator paused and asked, “Well, could we say that God dvu people?” There was complete silence for three or four minutes and he noticed tears welling in these elders eyes as it sunk in what that meant. They had heard that God loved people no matter what. No matter what they did, generation after generation. But it wasn’t until they heard it in a rare word in their own language that it really sunk in what this meant. The distinctiveness of this love God had for them and called for them to have for one another.¹

¹ From Bob Creson’s “The Finish Line: Stories of Hope through Bible translation”

For me, the words that I hold onto that help me to grasp the distinctiveness of God's love came to me during my last sabbatical. I know that sabbatical in the form most clergy take it can seem a bit like a boondoggle. Like I'm off to play for three months. But at a deeper level, it is creating the space of mind, body, and spirit apart from the mental, emotional, and spiritual demands of this work that creates a path for connecting with God more deeply. And that connectiveness goes on to root me in God for many years to come in my work among you, at least that's what I found eight years ago to be true.

One experience in particular has had a lasting effect on me spiritually, and it has to do with God's love and finding in new language a distinctiveness of it that has helped me experience it more deeply, even on an ongoing basis. I was talking with my spiritual director who had given me different biblical passages about God's love to ponder, and I was telling him that they weren't really doing anything for me. I found the phrase "God loves you" to be trite. That this notion of God just loving me really didn't move me in any way. "Well, what if God isn't trying to move you?" Huh? I responded. And then he said these words that were the ones I, a task-doer, problem-solver, growth-oriented person, needed to hear – "God's love is not utilitarian." "God's love is not utilitarian."

That may not mean much to you – we all have different words that can break open God’s love to us – but for me, it was transformative to think that God’s love was not outcome-oriented – it wasn’t trying to change me or get me to do something. While those may be natural outcomes of being connected to God’s love on an ongoing basis, of being a branch connected to the vine in the words of our gospel this morning, but the grace of God’s love is that it is freely given and it isn’t taken back, regardless of my response to it. I knew that in concept, but it took new words to make it stick in me.

What are the words or images or phrases that have helped you understand God’s love? Or are you still waiting for them?

May you be open to words and phrases - whether they come in another language, a TV show, a poem, a song lyric - that break open God’s love in a way that helps you root deeper in it and stay connected to the vine, and the vinegrower who is tending to us all.