

What is Love?

Rev. John Allen

Valentines Day for me most years includes a familiar ritual. Standing in the aisle full of Hallmark Cards, reading one, after another, after another, after another.

I don't know why I do this, because I almost invariably end up getting a blank card where I can write my own message.

The diversity of the cards is staggering. From the sincere to the humorous, the poetic to the crass. And yet, at least to me, there never seems to be the right one. In that whole long aisle full of almost every imaginable sentiment and message, what I am looking for is still missing.

Which is of course not because the love that I know in my life is just so unprecedented and unique. The reason is much simpler.

It is really hard to capture what love is, in words. It is very hard to answer this seemingly simple question. What is love?

Today's scripture is trying also trying to answer this question. And, while I also don't think it would make a particularly good greeting card, it does tell us something important about love.

“Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God. Everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love.”

God and love are so close to one another that when we love one another it is a way of knowing God. Everyone who loves knows God.

Love is a gift from God, and love leads us toward God.

God and love are so wrapped up in one another that the writer of this morning’s reading is left with no choice but to finally put it plainly.

God is love.

God is love.

Which is beautiful. And somewhat abstract. Because who and what God is is no easier a question to answer than what love is. So we have these two, woven together, but still a bit beyond our naming.

Perhaps we can approach an answer in another story. This one from the life of Jesus. On the night of the Last Supper.

That night, Jesus wrapped a towel around his waist and knelt before his disciples one by one washing their dusty calloused feet. The one whom they called Lord, offered this simple act of care humbly and without hesitation. It was act of honoring the other without reference to status or station.

And after he had washed their feet, Jesus stood up, sat at at table with them and began to teach. That night he offered them a new commandment. He said “love one another, as I have loved you.”

Which again, when those words are sitting on the onion skin pages of our bibles, or being read to us in worship, they could easily sound like another abstract theological idea.

But in that room, with the dirty basin of water and crumpled towel still in the corner of the room, these words were not at all abstract.

“Love each other, just as I have loved you.” “See what I did? Do that.”

So maybe this is what love is? It is the simple acts of care offered without hesitation.

The part of ourselves that is willing to kneel before another to wash their feet.

Maybe this is what love is. It is a note tucked in the lunch of a stressed out kid.

It is the unrequested casserole left on the doorstep of a new mom.

It is brushing the hair of a spouse who these days sometimes doesn't even remember who you are.

This is one of the great gifts of Jesus.

His life shows us what God's love looks like on the ground of our real world.

And in Jesus we see that love is so much more than just an emotion or a feeling that can be expressed in words.

Love is an act. It is something that we do, in a thousand little ways every day.

Love is something we build, out of devotion, service, care, honesty, and trust. It is something that we offer each other not in mere sentiment, but something that our very lives can be evidence of.

Which might be why it is so hard to pick out the right card.

And yet, I do always get a card. Or make one.

Because even if none of them have the right words, the act of getting it, writing on it, sealing it up, and placing it in the mail or in someones hands, that *shows* love.

The best way to express love is not with poetry, but with what we do for one another.

Another way to know that love is not just a feeling? It is commanded of us.

We know that we cannot force ourselves to feel love. And yet, Jesus commands us to love one another. While we cannot make ourselves *feel* love. We can make ourselves *live* love. We can bring ourselves to acts of love.

In our romantic relationships—for example—the emotional experience of falling in love does not last long enough to sustain a lifelong relationship. In the relationships in our lives that last and deepen, love becomes more than a feeling. It becomes a way of being to and for each other.

Love cannot just be something we feel. It must be something we do.

And does not just matter to the people we love. It matters to God.

Our reading this morning ends with a sobering admonition.

“Those who say, ‘I love God’, and hate their brothers or sisters, are liars; for those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen. The commandment we have from him is this: those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also.”

The history of religions is full of efforts to serve God directly. Most of the religions in the world around the early Christians believed that the gods wanted things from humans, animal sacrifices, or burnt offerings, incense, oil. These things were physically poured over statues and burnt on altars by way of giving a gift to a god, the way we might give a tangible gift to our friend.

The author of 1 John is pointing his community in a different direction.

We cannot see God. We cannot touch God. And truth be told, we cannot give things to God directly.

So how do we love God whom we cannot see?

By loving those we can see.

How do we serve God?

By serving one another.

