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Love – I Corinthians 13

I love you all. Not perfectly, and there's some of us not on the best terms with one another, but still I love you all.

And that is because love, as I mean love, and as God means us to love, is not some sappy emotion, but an attitude, a quality, most obviously seen in how we act among others. But we struggle, not least because our culture has taken this attitude and made it into a precious, fine feeling that happens between two people or at most within a family or small group. So let's take a step back and look at this little thing called "love."

People learn in different ways. Each person processes life differently. One way to see how we're different is through a personality test called the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator. You may well have taken this yourself; it uses four axes to codify your personality type. Each axis divides us into two groups. The third of those four splits us up into two broad types of people: Thinking (the people who deal with life's events as rational exercises – thinkers, or "Ts") and Feeling (people who follow

their hearts, feelers or “Fs”). I, for example, am an INTJ – that T is right there.

The idea is that some of people experience life primarily as an exercise in rational thought (the Ts), while others look at the world based on how they feel about what’s happening. (This is *way* oversimplified, and everybody fits on a spectrum, not either/or, but stick with me here.)

Strangely enough, love is more about thinking than feeling. So, today I’m talking more to the thinkers, not the feelers – sorry, you folks, we’ll process why that bothers you some other time. But even you feelers may resonate with some of this head-stuff; let’s see.

Now, I’ve always been told that I spend most of my time in my head, that it’s a very long journey between my head and my heart. That’s where I get that “T” in my personality type, and it may be true, but I’m also something of a sentimental type: I tear up easily at poignant stories, movies, and patriotic moments.

That two-sided perspective gives me a little insight and leverage into both personality types in this discussion about love, the quintessential feeling for most, but not from the Bible’s point of view: the Bible is much more T than F. The love of the Bible is much different from what we call “love” today.

The house I grew up in was something of a hodge-podge. It started existence as a tuberculosis sanatorium – the mountain air was considered good for those over-taxed lungs.

The way it was laid out, we ended up with two living rooms instead of a dining room, and what was called the breakfast room was our dining room. We shared the table with two radiators, a refrigerator, a set of shelves, and the washer and dryer – a bit tight!

But on the wall, under the light and between the two North windows, was a trivet, hung on a nail, with a stylized Pennsylvania Dutch picture of two people leaning forward to touch lips. The legend underneath it read, “Kissin’ don’t last; Cookin’ do.” Romance fades; caring carries on.

Every time I read through Paul’s hymn to love, I am reminded of this: love – the kind of love that Paul’s talking about, the most important and fundamental kind of love, Divine love, even – love is not an emotion, but an attitude. Kissin’ – the romance – is powerful and exciting; but cookin’, the day-to-day care, will still be important long after hubby’s forgetting that all-important anniversary has become a stale, routine joke.

Read through it yourself. There’s no emotion there, just practicing of an attitude – with the possible exception of being “happy with the truth.”

Modern “love,” on the other hand, is almost exclusively emotion. We’re told you have to feel it. It’s demonstrated by intensity of feeling. “I love you” is a tug at the heart. That’s why “love” as an abstract concept is so hard to grasp – like “love is all you need,” or “love makes the world go ‘round.’”

The ancient Hebrews were more inclined to see emotion of this sort as tugging at their inward parts, their guts rather than the heart. Emotional reactions had to do with things that affected you at your core, not just your heart – so fear, terror, anger, loss, yes, even affection, came from your innards, and twisted them accordingly.

But the kind of love we’re talking about here is not just affection. It’s not just a feeling. It’s an attitude. One clue to how we have changed from the meaning Scripture tries to convey is to go back to the King James Version.

You all that grew up on the King James Bible, do you remember what it says here in 1 Corinthians 13? It doesn’t say love. Really. It says, charity. Charity. What we think of as something given away, something of substance, even welfare – as in, “I don’t want your charity!”

So, charity for us is a thing, a patronizing thing, something given to lessen another’s need. Hm. How did that end up as love?

From Latin, naturally – the language of the church in its adolescence. Caritas, the Latin, was used to translate one of the Greek words for love: *agape*, all-encompassing love. Not the love of feelings for your honey, but love in the sense of caring for other beings. Charity is putting legs on that idea. Caritas became charity. But the word they both translate for us is *agape*. Love as attitude – love in action.

And that's what Paul talks about. Listen to it again – (Love is patient...) Sure, you can hear romantic love layers in this; but what you really hear is relationship, and a relationship driven by attitude. Deliberate attitude over heart; action over emotion. That's why charity has come to mean something substantial – it's about actions, intentions, attitude, relationships, not just warm thoughts.

You may really hate someone, dislike their name, complain incessantly about them – but you can still love them with this attitude of *agape*. And *agape*, in the hands of Paul and the words of Jesus, *agape* gives us a whole way of relating to the rest of humanity in a Christian way. Jesus may well have spoken Aramaic, but when he said love, it was written in Greek as *agape*.

What is love? We use, broadly, three types. There is an English word to describe the kind of love we talk about when we fall in love with someone we hope to spend our lives with; it's limerence, the state of infatuation with another. Limerence passes; it's by its very nature a

transient *feeling*. The second: we describe our common bond with other people as humanism - the ethereal ideal of the common good of humanity – heady, but still *feeling*. *Agape* is the human manifestation of what God showed for us in becoming a human being. Action, relationship.

That’s an attitude, a state of being we can only guess at, not being God ourselves. That God could do what God did for us in Emmauel. That we emulate by *doing*.

Here’s how we do this: we set our behavior consciously to mold our attitude, and our attitude molds our emotions, and both of them mold our character, which then affects the character of those we interact with. We seek to imitate Christ, and in doing that, cause people to imitate us, and as Diane said about spreading peace last week, we also spread love, and dignity, and self-esteem, and further the Gospel.

The early church showed an attitude of *agape* by being the first responders of the ancient world. When others rushed out of the cities where plague struck, Christians streamed in to care for them. They cared for those who had previously mocked or oppressed them. They did unto others far better than others did unto them – and it caught on, and their numbers swelled because of what their faith called them to do.

In the spirit of *agape*, we do violence to the cause of Christ when we exclude others, push away them away. Our faith calls us to put our

lives in the hands of God, not try to hold them in our own – we must care about others even at risk to ourselves.

How many of us can do that? Some of us are wired so that we run toward danger – but how well do we deal with insults and hostility? Others do well at deflecting hate, but are they able to risk physical danger? Still others can endure pain, but can they do it and show that they do it so that others can bear suffering (grief, too)?

The Twelve-Step programs that seek to rescue people from their addiction to mind-altering substances substitute a better alternative to those substances: act as if. Act the way you should, even if you don't automatically feel that way. Do what you know you should do, not as you feel you want to. Act toward others as you'd like them to act toward you, and when they don't, give them the benefit of the doubt. Act from attitude, not emotion. Just like my friend who, when in traffic someone communicated their displeasure with him by using the most basic form of American sign language, would smile, wave, and say, "Have a nice day!"

Treat others – and especially strangers – the way you would like to be treated: with respect, with dignity, as if they had needs and wants as well – because they do. That is love, Thinking love, yes, but if you practice it enough, it will become the kind of relationship with those

you'll never even know that is the very best of that heart-rending love of stage, screen and television.

And you'll be doing – and maybe, just maybe feeling that divine love, too.

Jesus said, “No one has greater love than to give up one's life for one's friends.” Love came down at Christmas – and we can follow through on that, no matter how much of a curmudgeon you are: even me! I love you all.