

What is Love?

Let us pray...

Loving and gracious God, we thank you for the Word made flesh. We thank you for your son and for his example of selflessness, sacrifice, and love. Jesus is the greatest example of love that the world has ever known – laying down his life for the benefit of humankind. May the words from my lips reflect only your truth. Amen.

Today's epistle from Corinthians is perhaps the most recited chapter in all of Paul's writings. What is love?

Love consumes us. More songs are sung about it than anything else. It is the focus of human relations for much of our lives. It is the source of the most indescribable happiness and gut-wrenching pain and regret. Love is the pursuit of each one of us from adolescence until our last breath. We seek to know love, find love, be loved, give love, and fight for and over love.

First Corinthians 13 is the most popular bible verse read at weddings. It was for Ginette and me nearly 25 years ago. And I suspect it was the same for many of the couples who attend Christ Church. The words are powerful: "love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It does not dishonor others, it is not self-serving, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs." The Bible shares that love is more than a feeling. It is full of action. Having this piece of scripture shared at a wedding service serves as a type of vow in and of itself.

Each of these actions is a counter to how humans often behave: impatient, inwardly focused, proud, jealous, keeping score, mindful of what is in it for me. Our world is full of unloving actions. And yet, love prevails. It is an act and emotion that we aspire to. Paul's teaching encourages us to be better than our instincts and to model our lives on that of Christ.

But what does love really mean? The Oxford dictionary defines love as: "an intense feeling of deep affection" and "a great interest and pleasure in something."

These definitions seem inadequate to me. As is often the case with the English language, words lack precision. In the case of love, I can say I love my dog but also say that I love chocolate ice cream. They are not the same context, yet the word is the same. I can say that I love playing guitar and that I love my daughters. Again, the context in which the word is used is too limiting. Indeed, it is love in the strict dictionary definition, but loving my daughter, or wife doesn't come close to how I feel

toward my dog. I might really enjoy being with Ollie, our rescue dog of four months, and might feel affection toward her. I might even say I love her, but it's not the same. Ancient Greek society recognized that there are many kinds of love. There are six Greek words for love and defining each allows us to fully interpret the context of the love we feel for others.

The first kind of love the Greek's defined was **eros**, named after the Greek god of carnal love and fertility. It represents sexual **passion and desire** and is the root of the word erotic. Today we associate this feeling with falling in love, as something exhilarating and exciting, hence the term, falling madly in love

The second kind of love was **philia**, an affectionate love or **deep friendship**. In ancient Greek society, this was valued far greater than eros as it was considered love of equal terms—and one without the trappings of sexual attraction. Born from an appreciation of one another, philia is a kind of love that endures within long-standing friendships.

Agape is a selfless love that, today, is seldom offered as frequently as it should. Translated into Latin as *caritas* and forming the root of the word charity, agape is a pay-it-forward approach to love, where you show a **universal kindness to others** and offer to understand to those in need. C.S. Lewis referred to it as “gift love,” the highest form of Christian love.

Aristotle wrote, “All friendly feelings for others are an extension of a man's feelings for himself.” He was not alone in those sentiments. The ancient Greeks classed **philautia** as one of the most important kinds of love because they recognized that you cannot share what you do not have. Without love for yourself you can't hope to be able to extend the same feelings to others. Philautia should not be confused with vanity or unhealthy self-obsession, rather it allows us to **empathize** with others as we share a common feeling.

Storge is the primal, **protective love** we all feel for members of our family. This kind of love is rooted in kinship and allegiance. It's the unspoken bond between two people that transcends both friendship and sexual attraction because it is driven by familiarity, belonging and dependency.

Xenia is an ancient Greek concept of **hospitality**. It is almost always translated as 'guest-friendship' or 'ritualized friendship'. It is an institutionalized relationship rooted in generosity, gift exchange, and reciprocity. This form of love most closely resembles the type of relationship that our First Nations Peoples aspired to with earlier settlers and long for in reconciliation.

One can see then that a simple phrase, I love you, can be interpreted to mean many different things from the point of view of the ancient Greeks.

Based on the definitions of love provided by the Greeks I can more precisely say that I eros my spouse, agape my dog, storge my children, philia my close friends and offer xenia to my neighbor when I assist in shoveling their driveway. However, even the Greeks are limited in expressing their love of ice cream.

Despite the various contexts in which love is used, by far the most common is our interaction with one another; specifically, the romantic encounters we have. Afterall, Valentine's Day was established to celebrate Eros as opposed to Agape.

In his book *The Five Love Languages: How to Express Heartfelt Commitment to Your Mate*, Gary Chapman outlines five general ways that romantic partners express and experience love. These love languages are acts of service, gift-giving, physical touch, quality time, and words of affirmation.

According to Chapman's theory, each person has one primary and one secondary love language. Chapman suggests that to discover another person's love language, one must observe the way they express love to others and analyze what they complain about most often and what they request from their significant other most often. He theorizes that people tend to naturally give love in the way that they prefer to receive love, and better communication between couples can be accomplished when one can demonstrate caring to the other person in the love language the recipient understands.

I think Chapman would be challenged to identify the love languages of Jesus. His whole life, every aspect of his being was an act of love. It is very hard to isolate just two love languages when we consider Jesus. In one complete package Jesus offers his life as a gift for humanity, he engaged in close contact with his disciples offering quality time and instruction, he touched as a method of healing, he offered words of affirmation in the form of reconciliation and prayer, and he sought to serve. Providing an example of selflessness – displaying acts of service to anyone who requested it – lepers, the centurion, the steward who ran out of wine, Lazarus, the woman caught in adultery, and so on.

When I look to Jesus I see gift-giving as his primary love language. Others might see things differently. But for me, His life is a gift of how to live, and his death demonstrates the selflessness that we should offer to one another.

First Peter 2: 21-24 aptly summarizes his affection for us: “For this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving an example, so that you should follow in his steps. He committed no sin, and no deceit was found in his mouth.

When he was abused, he did not return abuse; when he suffered, he did not threaten; but he entrusted himself to the one who judges justly. He himself bore our sins in his body on the cross, so that, free from sins, we might live for righteousness; by his wounds you have been healed.”

In his sermon last Sunday Pastor Kit spoke about vocation. More specifically he focused on how God calls each one of us to serve. That service is agape. A selfless giving of our time and talent to serve our church and community. It is a recognition that we are called, in the words of Jesus, “to love your neighbor as yourself.” That calling is manifest in all sorts of ways, some obvious and others less so.

One of the things that most impressed me when I first came to Christ Church was the sense of service and hospitality – agape and xenia. In fact, I don’t think I’ve encountered a church with so many people engaged in some sort of ministry. In my time here I’ve had the privilege of helping with the tech team, as an Intercessor, Alpha team member, turkey dinner helper, grass cutter, men’s bible study coordinator and occasional homilist.

Many others have assumed a myriad of more prominent ministries including, churchwarden, treasurer, worship band member, chorister, envelope secretary, church school organizer and teacher, outreach coordinator, and bible school organizer just to name a few. The list of opportunities seems endless. And faithfully, year after year, generous members of the Christ Church faith community have come forward to lead, serve and witness to God’s call for each one of us. Some of those experiences are in leadership while others are behind the scenes.

For many years I have devoted considerable time, thought and prayer to discerning a call from God to accept a deeper invitation to service and ministry. In addition to working for the Anglican Diocese of Toronto as the Director of Stewardship Development – an honour I’ve had for nearly 20 years – I keep feeling this push or gentle nudge if you like to embrace servant leadership; and this feeling hasn’t gone away. This form of service is as a deacon at Christ Memorial Church.

This is not a call I take lightly: I have indicated to parish leadership an interest, sought out and confirmed a spiritual director, and connected with the diocesan coordinator of deacons. I have expressed an interest to engage in the process of formation should it be the will of the vestry of this parish. I welcome your prayers and encouragement.

What is love?

Love goes beyond loving those who are easy to love when the love is reciprocal. It is making a choice to love no matter what – in the way you keep being there for your

child even though you know they've messed up. To always love in a way that brings you closer to God and his love for each one of us.

St. Paul concludes his epistle with a most memorable statement: "And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love."

It is a gift from our Father in heaven. To love and be loved is the greatest gift of all.