

We’re now a few short weeks away from Valentine’s Day, the day where love is professed, where gifts are given...or (heaven forbid) gifts forgotten. So fellas...I’m looking at you. This is your friendly reminder to go ahead and start thinking of something now before it’s too late!

Candy, cards, balloons, flowers, and more will be given...just to show our significant others that they are loved. This year alone, Hallmark and its competitors will sell more than 145 million cards for Valentine’s Day,¹ bringing in an estimated \$955 million dollars.² A billion dollar industry...just to say...I love you!

As a society, we love “love.”

So much so that we’ll spend tons of money on those cards and candy and balloons and flowers just to have a different way to express it. We’ll watch romantic comedy movies and read romance novels. (Don’t worry, I won’t tell anybody you do!)

We’ll quote from a favorite movie or book...

I’m sure most of you recognize this quote from *It’s a Wonderful Life*: “What is it you want, Mary? What do you want? You want the moon? Just say the word and I’ll throw a lasso around it and pull it down. Hey. That’s a pretty good idea. I’ll give you the moon, Mary. ”

How about known Romantic heartthrob Edgar Allen Poe? That’s right. Edgar Allen Poe. In his poem titled *Annabel Lee*, writes, “But we loved with a love that was more than love – I and Annabel Lee.” Now granted, the poem was about their love after she died, so he still stayed on brand!

I had an old girlfriend who was obsessed with the 2005 movie version of *Pride and Prejudice* in which Mr. Darcy confesses to Elizabeth Bennett, “You have bewitched me, body and soul. I love, love, love you. I never wish to be parted from you from this day on.”

Again, as a society, we love “love.”

¹ <https://www.cnbc.com/2017/12/08/hallmark-greeting-cards-have-adjusted-to-the-digital-revolution.html>

² <https://www.npr.org/2019/02/14/691963430/greeting-cards-are-still-a-thing-in-the-digital-age-thanks-millennials>

What about as a church? Do we love “love?” Well, we say we do. Look at 1 Corinthians 13, which is one of the most widely known and quoted sections of scripture.

“If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. If I give away all my possessions, and if I hand over my body so that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing.

Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.”³

This text is beautiful and true and it stirs up something in us when we hear it...as do quotes from our favorite novels, movies, and poems.

We live our lives in this space. We are surrounded by messages of love...even though those messages may convey a shallow perception of what love really is. We are inundated by those warm and fuzzy feelings about love and faith and peace.

But love is not just a feel-good emotion. It is not shallow. Love is complicated, and love is deep. Most importantly, though, love is not ours to hoard or to keep for ourselves.

One way to view love is by *doing* love in our own lives. When we do that, we start asking ourselves questions like this: Am I loving others?

Now this is an important and vital question to be asking, and it is a question we will come back to, but our two scripture lessons this morning help us put all of this “love stuff” we’ve been talking about into proper perspective.

Our first selection from 1 John, chapter 4 addresses this head on. And actually, for a fun fact, the writer of 1st, 2nd, and 3rd John identifies himself in Greek as “ho presbyteros,” otherwise translated, “the elder.” I was once told that in order for a sermon to be a *true* Presbyterian sermon it must contain at least one Greek or Hebrew word, so we’ve hit our quota! OK, now that my inner Presbyterian nerd is done talking, let’s get to what he actually says.

³ 1 Cor. 13:1-7

“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.”⁴

In just two verses, the writer uses a variation of the word love six times! When reading the entire passage, you just want to tell him, “OK OK we got it! Love, love, love, love, love, love.”

And I know for myself, I tend to gloss over these mentions of love. “God is love,” the writer says. I’ll respond to myself, “Well, sure...of course...God is love,” and then I’ll move on like that isn’t the most revelatory confession in the history of the world! It is incredible how easy it can be to zip right by it because I’ve heard it so much. But as I was reminded of by a friend just last night, we can never hear it enough.

The elder continues, “God’s love was revealed among us in this way: God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him. In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins...We love because God first loved us.”⁵

This, my friends, is what loves looks like. This is true love, pure love, perfect love...and it starts with God.

- So what is it that we are to do with this information?
- What are we to do about the fact that God loves us so much that God sent Jesus Christ to this world for you and for me?
- What are we to do about the knowledge that God loves us so much that Jesus Christ was sent to this world to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins?⁶
- What are we to do about the idea that God loves the world so much that Jesus Christ came not to condemn the world, but so the world might be saved through him?⁷

Well, the short answer is that we are to respond.

And it just so happens that in our Gospel story today, Jesus helps us with this through his discussion with Nicodemus.

⁴ 1 John 4:7-8

⁵ 1 John 4:9-10; 19

⁶ 1 John 4:10

⁷ John 3:17

We are to be born of water and the Spirit.

We are to be born from above.⁸

We are to move from darkness to the light.

Jesus said, "Those who do what is true come to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that their deeds have been done in God."⁹

Those deeds that Jesus mentions can vary from situation to situation, but there is one underlying thread to it all: you guessed it...love.

Taking it even a step further, the elder from 1 John, as we've already heard, specifically equates loving God with loving others. PAUSE

Rev. Dr. Alyce M. McKenzie is a United Methodist Pastor, Professor, and Director of Center for Preaching Excellence at the Perkins School of Theology at Southern Methodist University. She once told a story which she calls, "The Parable of What I Found in the Parking Lot at Kohl's."

It was Good Friday afternoon and she pulled into the parking lot at Kohl's in Allen, Texas, where she lives. If you're asking what she was doing shopping on Good Friday, she would tell you that for some reason felt compelled to go buy a bathmat and toilet huggie because she had a Kohl's coupon.

As she walked across the parking lot on her way into the store, she happened to look down at the asphalt and there glimmered a golden ring. When she stooped to pick it up, she found that it was a golden ring with a row of five small diamonds on top.

Her first thought was "Hmmm..."

Her second thought was "I wonder if it fits." It did. Perfectly.

Her third thought was "What kind of careless person drops their ring in a parking lot? Do they really deserve a ring like this?"

Her fourth thought was "What if I just kept this?"

And her fifth and final thought was "I can't keep it, because it's not mine to keep."

She approached the customer service desk, where a man in his mid-twenties stood. She handed him the ring and said, "I just found this in the parking lot."

⁸ John 3:5,7

⁹ John 3:21

His eyes widened, and he reached for the loudspeaker mic.

Rev. Dr. McKenzie said, "Wait! I wouldn't get on the loudspeaker and announce that you've just found a ring with 5 diamonds in it and that the owner should come to the back and claim it."

"Good point." He said. "I'll put it in the safe and call my manager."

She wrote her name and phone number on a post it note and gave it to the customer service attendant, you know, just in case nobody claimed it. It did fit her perfectly after all.

After she turned it in, she went to the linens and towels section and bought a beige bathmat and toilet hugger and drove home. She told her husband about it, and he said. "If you had kept it, every time you looked at your hand you would have thought, 'I've kept something that belongs to someone else.' " PAUSE

Perhaps Dr McKenzie and her husband are on to something here.

Love doesn't belong to us.

It isn't something for us to keep for ourselves.

Love comes from God, because God is love.

Paul even ends that famous chapter from 1 Corinthians...“and now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love.”¹⁰ More important than faith? More important than hope? Yes...it all boils down to one thing...love.

Last week I said we have been called together. That hasn't changed. But if we are called together and do not love, then we're not doing it right.

Friends, love is only love if we express it...share it...and give it away.

Don't keep something that belongs to someone else.

Express love to others because God expresses love to us.

Share love with others because God shares love with us.

Give love away to others because God gives love to us.

Love because God is love.

May it be so, now and forever. Amen.

¹⁰ 1 Corinthians 13:13