

All We Need Is Love?

[G]Love, [D]love, [Em]love G]Love, [D]love, [Em]love [D7]Love, [G]love, [D7]love.

[G]There's nothing you can [D]do that can't be [Em]done.

[G]Nothing you can [D]sing that can't be [Em]sung.

[D7]Nothing you can [G]say but

you can learn how to [D7]play the game. It's easy.

There's nothing you can make that can't be made.

No one you can save that can't be saved.

Nothing you can do but you can learn how to be you in time. It's easy.

[G]All you [Am7]need is [D7]love, [G]all you [Am7]need is [D7]love,

[G]All you [B7]need is [Em]love, [G]love, [C]love is [D7]all you [C]need.

Yes, as John Lennon and fellow Beatles sang: perhaps all we do need is love. You know, this word—this concept of love is pretty much everywhere, isn't it? Watch a soap opera—a love story. Read a romance novel—love. Rent or go to a romantic comedy or tragic drama and it's all about love. Turn on the radio and whether it's hip hop, country, rock, industrial, dance, gospel, pop, or folk music—often the songs are about love. But let's be serious. We get most of our information from the television and the internet, so let's turn it on. What do you know? Love is in the air, or I should say, on the air...

McDonald's is famous for their commercials and that scary clown. Cut to healthy, good-looking person sporting a Big Mac, super-sized fries and a shake; she is in bliss and the music plays in the background—duh, duh, duh, duh, duh--I'm lovin' it! Not really sure what she's lovin' because judging from her petite figure, I doubt she is lovin' MickyD's all that much.

But don't despair, Subaru's got you covered. What makes a Subaru car a Subaru? Love. It's what makes a Subaru. Or LensCrafters eyeglasses: See what you love, love what you see. And Payless Shoes: I ♥ shoes. Finally, there's Olay, selling skin lotion: Love the skin you're in.



In short, we're bombarded with this thing called love! Makes me think that back in 1956, Micky and Sylvia were right: Love *is* strange; a lot of people take it for a game.



And yet, love is precisely what John's Gospel talks a lot about. In fact, today's story might as well be entitled: love, love, and more love. You see, last week's "vine and branches" metaphor [John 15:1-8] really continues on in today's passage in verses 9-16. Jesus says that he is the vine and we are the branches. He lives in/stays with us and we live in/stay with him. And now starting in verse 9, Jesus builds an argument for what living and staying looks like. We are to live in/stay with *love*.

But to better understand where Jesus was coming from, we need to redefine *love* as a concept. Obviously, in 2012 and in the Capitalist Capital of the world, the U.S., we'll have to put aside the superficial love definitions out there to make sense of all this. Essentially, there are three Biblical understandings of love that connect to the culture of Israel and Palestine—both long before Jesus was born and then during NT times, i.e. the 1st/2nd Century. First off, we have *eros*. *Eros*, a Greek word, only appears in the Greek translation of the OT, called the Septuagint. *Eros* is the romantic, sensuous, and also physical side of love or affection. It is not just sexual in nature, though, for *eros* is about passion, delight, and care in relationship. But the OT doesn't have *eros* in it. The original language of the OT is Hebrew and there are actually two primary words for love.

The first is *ahab*. Ahab usually refers to love between people—spouses or life partners, parents and children, good friends. Ahab is not used often to refer to God’s love for people. That would be the 2nd Hebrew love word: *hesed*. Hesed is not adequately translated in the English language. It describes God’s love [hesed] for God’s covenant people. It is faithful, it is promised, it is loyal, and it is part of God’s obligation to humankind. God promises to be faithful, merciful, loving, etc. and likewise expects the people to be faithful, merciful, loving, etc. Hesed appears in Psalm 23: *surely goodness and [mercy/faithful love/hesed] will follow me all the days of my life and I will dwell in the house of the lord forever*. But hesed could also be expressed between people. Someone could promise hesed to another, based on a mutual exchange of affection and loyalty, i.e. in a life partnership or marriage. Even nations expressed *hesed* to each other—promising to remain at peace with each other; no war.

So fast forward to the New Testament era in which Jesus taught. Keeping the Hebrew concepts of love in mind, here is what the Greek-speaking world knew well. *Phileo* is the commonly-used word and is actually a verb. We live in the Philadelphia area, so you should know about this word. Phileo is brotherly/sisterly love, a human response to something that is delightful. The word for friend in John’s Gospel is *philo*, and occurs six times. And of course, the last NT word in Greek for love is *agape*. Agape is charitable, selfless, unconditional love—belonging to that level of affection and care that we don’t talk about lightly. Variations of agape are found nine times in the verses we just read in John. *As the Father has LOVED me, so I have LOVED you; abide in my LOVE. If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my LOVE, just as I have kept my Father’s commandments and abide in his LOVE... This is my commandment, that you LOVE one another as I have LOVED you.*

This kind of teaching would have been new for the disciples and all who heard Jesus teach it. Remember that a few weeks ago, we looked at Jesus’ I AM statement of being the good shepherd—laying down his life for the sheep. But now he takes it to a new level. Not only does the good shepherd lay down his life, but people are to lay down their lives for each other. This was not mainstream; this would have been a bit shocking; this was not I’m lovin’ it—the stuff of commercials. This was agape love. In other words, Jesus taught of a love that was way more than being nice or kind. This agape love was commitment and involved self-sacrifice on behalf of others—pushing aside ego in order to love. Well, of course, because the word agape is a verb. Love is about actions.

And it is with that in mind that we turn to friendship—Jesus' second teaching in this passage. You see, Jesus connected *philo* [friend] to *agape*. Why? To show the unique relationship of God with people, people with God, and the expression of that blessed relationship in the fruit of human relationships. Friends, you see, is what Jesus called his disciples—a very startling thing to do considering Jesus was their Rabbi or teacher. In this way, Jesus crossed over traditional boundaries and raised the bar. He and his followers were friends.

Friendship in Jesus' time, the 1st Century in the Mediterranean world, was serious business. Being called a friend was a title of honor. Friends were treated like family. There were certain obligations that one had to fulfill with his/her friends. First and foremost, a friend in this culture and time looked out for his/her friend's needs and considered those needs to be just as important as his/her own needs. In this understanding of friendship, reciprocity was key. If a woman showed concern and care for her friend, she would expect the same in return. In this context, there was obligation and responsibility mixed in with love and friendship. Sort of reminds me of God's covenantal, promise-type relationships with people in the OT.

In this way, Jesus was asking the disciples to make an investment, a commitment in friendship and love. He had shared with them the love and mercy of God his Father. He put to the side any selfish ambition to heal, forgive, minister to, and care for. If his friends, the disciples were to be sent out into the world to share this love and mercy of God, they needed to understand what that meant. It wasn't forcing things on people; it was not religious oppression; it was agape love; it was friendship. They were to care about someone else's struggles, pain, and needs without looking for some kind of reward. Yes, the reciprocity was still there in those friendships, for the disciples were also told to expect love in return. If they were not shown love, they were to dust off their sandals and move on. I think Paul got it when he wrote to the church in Rome. This is Romans 13:8: *Let no debt remain outstanding, except the continuing debt to love one another, for whoever loves others has fulfilled the law. We are obligated to love each other.*

So much to live by here. For often we choose our friendships—who we love and care for, based on sameness or familiarity. We usually try to stay within our social circles as much as we can. But Jesus broke down those barriers and called strangers, the other, friends. We are challenged to be intentional about our relationships with people. We are sent out to love any and every kind of person, breaking down our own boundaries by calling them friends. All we ought to expect in return is that same love. It's the kind

of relationship in which someone sticks up for you when you're not there while others are throwing you under the bus, talking behind your back. A friend has the moral courage to say, "My friend is not like that." A friend does the unpopular, less-rewarding thing on your behalf. Friends are willing to sacrifice something out of love. No better way to put it than how Jesus did: *No one has greater love than this: to lay down one's life for one's friends*. It's not about the cross, as we often mistake it. In the Greek phrase laying down one's life, it literally means putting ego to the side, forgetting oneself for a moment, humility not for personal gain but simply humility born out of love.

Admittedly, many will say that this love is abstract and floating in the air somewhere. Some may claim that it's impossible for humans to love each other in such an excellent way. Certainly, we struggle to do it—that's for sure. But I for one refuse to give that as an excuse not to love. And actually, love the verb is *not* an abstract concept; love is not mushy or superficial; love is not mere words, a slogan, commercial, or catchy hook to sell records. Love is a verb. And love is shown in selflessness, unconditional acceptance, actions of justice when no one else wishes to participate and sometimes when no one is looking. Love is a verb. Love flows from God in *agape* form through Jesus Christ, through us, and then is shown in the fruit that we bear in our relationships with others.

All we need is love?

Yes—because love bears all things.

Love believes all things.

Love forgives.

Love doesn't hurt.

Love doesn't discriminate.

Love doesn't oppress.

Love is patient, kind, and merciful.

Love is eternal.

Love includes all the commandments.

Commandments don't exist without love.

Love is a verb.

Love is given freely to us by our God.

Jesus calls us friends.

And now we are sent out to love in such an excellent way—

With actions, friendships, humility, compassion, and mercy.

So love often and love well. Amen.