

Zion's UCC at Taborton  
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*Love is a Four Letter Word*

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Today we continue on our journey into what Jesus meant when he said to love God, neighbor and self. I think that too often we become very ethereal and grand and even gooey when we talk about love so I want to begin with a poem I heard at a wedding. It was so appropriate for the dog Owners who were getting married. It's by a poet named Taylor Mali. He has quite a bit of stuff on You Tube, including this poem. "Love is Like Owning a Dog". I have adapted it slightly, but not much.

Love is like owning a dog. First of all it's a big responsibility.

But love can give you security, especially if you're walking late at night with love on a leash. Muggers and thieves know that love is unpredictably. Who knows what it might do in its own defense. It might lunge right at them, snarling something about forgiveness or some other inappropriate feelings.

Love lies between you at night, happy and breathing and making funny noises.

Love wakes you up all hours of the night to meet its needs.

Love must be fed so that it will grow and be healthy.

Love doesn't like to be left alone for long periods, but it is always happy to see you when you come home.

Love may break a few things in its exuberance for life, but you can't be mad at love for long, can you?

Is love good all the time? NO!

Love makes messes and leaves little surprises where you least expect them .

Love sometimes needs to be cleaned up after.

BAD LOVE! Baaad love.

Sometimes you want to take a rolled up newspaper and swat love on the nose while telling it that you never, ever want love to do that again.

Mostly, love wants to go for long walks. It needs to be exercised. But, be careful. Love can leave you breathless or it can go around and around you until you're all wrapped up.

When you throw things away, love will bring them back, again and again, and again..

But mostly, love needs love. And in return, love loves you unconditionally.

Amen.

As I was composing this message, I was sitting with Buster, one of our two Yorkshire terriers and I was thinking about how much that poem applied to him. Yorkies are wonderful companion dogs. In Fact, they can smother you in love. Buster's idea of alone time is when he sits next to you and leans against you, rather than on top of you. Buster loves unconditionally. That is unless you're a squirrel or a cat. Remember, even love Isn't perfect. Sometimes I know. have to remind myself of that when he does dumb doggy things, but, as the poem said: "You can't mad at love for long "..

In Koine Greek, the language of the eastern Mediterranean in Jesus' time, and the language of the Gospels, there were actually 6 words for different kinds of love. You've probably heard most of them. Eros, agape, philios, etc.. You can always google them. We only have the word love. We expect the listener to be able to discern the type of love from the context of the sentence, so that we don't confuse "I love my spouse" with "I love chicken wings". There really should be a difference, you know.

Yet, we probably have dozens of words in English for the Greek word Eros, physical love. I'll let you compile that list on your own. But, I think that it is because we don't really want to talk about real love, the kind that St. Paul and Mr. Mali were talking about. We prefer the mechanical to the emotional. We promote STEM in our schools rather than philosophy and music because technology is much less messy. STEM can be tested with multiple choice. It can be fully standardized and ranked. Much harder to do that with Philosophy or religion, isn't it? Your computer doesn't leave little surprises like a living thing might. The same holds true for our interpersonal relationships.

We love to pigeon-hole people so we don't have to think about them. "She's just a..." "He's one of them..." Just fill in whatever category you'd like and the evaluation is complete. Trouble is, people are much messier than that. They ooze out of whatever category we've crammed them into. Whether you're the president, a rock star, a religious leader, or just one of us nobodies, you are a complex organism that does many wonderful things and makes some ghastly mistakes.

The trick of creating real love is to recognize that complexity in others and in ourselves. That was Jesus' message. Love God for sure and Love your neighbor, but do those things in the same way you love yourself. You can't give to others what you can't give to yourself. So give yourself a break, just as I hope you will do for the rest of us.

We're all messy and complex we bound around our lives like my terriers do, often oblivious to how we affect others. But real love sees through all that untidiness. It not only rates and categorizes, but understands and heals.

When Paul was writing to the church at Philippi, it was about 20 years after Jesus and Christianity was still in its infancy. No clear thoughts about Jesus and the meaning of his ministry had developed. It was kind of like the internet of today. You could hear all sorts of things and opinions. It was difficult to discern the true from the false. There wasn't even a set way of practicing the faith. Most of Paul's letters were trying to reign in the excesses. He knew that other missionaries were visiting the churches he had founded and preaching things Paul thought were wrong. And since Paul was in prison in Rome, all he could do was write and send assistants like Timothy to his followers. Some churches, like the one in Galatia, developed full dinners as a communion service, and it appears that it led to some overeating, greed about who got what and when, and a lot of drunkenness. There appears to be a lot of selfishness and power plays goin on in Philippi. Paul says they must change. They must put Christ first and

their own desires second. Don't watch out for your own good, but what is good for the community.

I guess that people in the first century weren't really that much different than people in 21st century. They had trouble loving their neighbors because they had a lot of trouble loving themselves. People who are at peace within themselves can avoid a lot of the jealousy and anger that leads to conflict in a community.

Beginning with verse 6, Paul uses the words of a very early Christian hymn to make his point. Jesus humbled himself, emptied himself, and made love his only criterion. Very few of us will ever do it as well as Jesus did, but we can try. God does ask you to do everything. God only asks you to do something.

As the poet says: "love needs love" and we need love. Even my dogs know that.