

Manningham Uniting Church

Fellowship@10

5th May 2024: Easter 6

Theme: Love, love, love

Text: John 15:9-17

Introduction

What are the top five languages spoken in the world?

Chinese — 1.3 billion Native Speakers

Spanish — 486 Million Native Speakers

English — 380 Million Native Speakers

Arabic — 362 Million Native Speakers

Hindi — 345 Million Native Speakers

Next question. How many words for Love are there in Greek? The answer is eight.

In English, we use “love” in many ways. We “love” our partner, we “love” the Spring weather, we “love” our friends” and we even “love” sweet and sour pork. It’s the same word, but obviously, there are slightly different meanings.

Hopefully, we love our partner more than we love our favourite food – although sweet and sour pork is pretty good. How many of you like sweet and sour pork?

In the ancient Greek language in which the New Testament was written, they had four different words for love – and all four words meant something different.

The four main Greek words for love are 1)**Philia**, 2) **Eros**, 3) **Storge**, and 4) **Agape**.

Let us pray... May my words and our thoughts be acceptable to you God, Aas we desire to know you and love you more. **AMEN.**

I’m fascinated by how fascinated we are with the topic of friendship. Theologians, philosophers, poets, songwriters, novelists, filmmakers, sociologists, anthropologists, and psychologists have all deal with this topic. Song lyrics and quotes by famous and not-so-famous people abound on the topic.

The best quote on friendship of all comes from the best friend of all. **“No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends”.** (John 15:13)

Friend is also a word that I use it somewhat sparingly because of its deep meaning for me. I value friends and friendship. We all know from our experience that one of the great blessings in life is friendship. My life has been greatly enriched by my friends.

Some of us have many friends, some only few, but I think a true friend is one that we enjoy being with, who shares our humour, our interests and is one we share our sadness and our joys.

This morning, I want to focus on two aspects of this text: the concept of friendship and what it means to “lay down one’s life” for a friend.

In this passage, Jesus refers to his followers as “friends,” which status Jesus grants “if you do what I command you” (15:14). The commandment Jesus refers to is given in John 15:12, “that you love one another as I have loved you,” a reiteration of the “new commandment” already given in John 13:34. However, in this passage, Jesus defines the nature of that love, which is “to lay down one’s life for one’s friends.”

According to Gail O’Day,¹ *“The English noun ‘friend’ does not fully convey the presence of love that undergirds the Johannine notion of friendship.”*

The Greek word is *philos*, derived from the root *phileo*, meaning “to love.” It refers not to a casual acquaintance, but to one who is beloved, who is dear to one’s heart. Elsewhere in John, it describes the relationship of Jesus to John the Baptist (3:29) and to Lazarus (11:11).

One might be tempted then to conclude that Jesus instructs his followers to lay down their lives only for those who are dear to their own hearts — their family, their church members, their narrow circle of closest friends. But this is not what Jesus means.

Rather, the “friends” for whom we should lay down our lives are those who are beloved by *Jesus*, not only by ourselves. This is made clear in John 15:16, in which Jesus declares ***“You did not choose me, but I chose you.”***

We are friends with one another because Jesus first called us friends (John 15:15), and therefore, the commandment to lay down our lives for our friends means nothing other than to lay down our lives for all those whom Jesus loves.

¹ Gail R. O’Day, “The Gospel of John: Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections,” in *The New Interpreters Bible*, vol. 9 (Nashville: Abingdon, 1996), 758.

Whom did Jesus love? When we begin to talk of “those whom Jesus loves” we soon realize that this means *everyone*, and most especially those who have been oppressed, ostracised, and threatened with death by the System. This Jesus who calls us “friend” perpetually turns the world inside out, centring the marginalized and marginalizing the centred.

There was a very well-known book written by Dale Carnegie many, many years ago, ***‘How to make friends and influence people’***.

We all know that there is only so much any of us can do to make a friendship happen, because, as we know, a friendship has to be mutual. I may want to be someone’s friend, but unless that person wants to be my friend, the friendship won’t come to pass. Friendships happen when two people choose each other as friends. If I choose someone as a friend, I need that person to choose me as their friend for the friendship to come to pass. The choice is at the heart of friendship, the choice of two people for each other. One of the more painful experiences of life is when the choice I make to befriend someone is not reciprocated by that person. Yet, in the gospel reading, Jesus doesn’t ask us to choose him as a friend.

He says, ***‘You did not choose me, no, I chose you’***.

Jesus does not call on us to choose him as he has chosen us, but, rather, he calls on us to remain in his love. We are to remain in the love that has chosen us.

We are being reminded that Jesus’ friendship with us is of a different quality to our human friendships where mutual choice is so important if it is to endure. As we know in human friendship, if any one of the friends ceases to choose the other, then that other person’s choice will eventually weaken too. This is not true of Jesus’ friendship with us. His loving choice of us endures, regardless of how we respond. It is always a given. Our calling is to remain in that enduring friendship, and, if we fall out of it, to return to it.

There is a cute cartoon that came to life on the internet during the COVID-19 pandemic: *“As the two friends wandered through the snow on their way home, Piglet grinned to himself, thinking how lucky he was to have a best friend like Pooh bear. Pooh thought to himself: “If the pig sneezes, he’s dead!”* Humorous and terribly human. Friends and family can both love and hate each other, companionship lives with competition. This is part of life.

In John 15: 9-17, John's Jesus describes his relationship with his followers as one of being "best friends". John uses the two Greek verbs for "love (agape and phileo) interchangeably... so when Jesus speaks of friends ["Philos"] here, he is saying "those who are loved".

Jesus directs his followers "to abide", that is, to maintain a mutual, interdependent relationship with each other, a communion of love. This love and friendship is like the intimate, organic relationship between the vine and the branches. It is to exist in honest recognition of each other regardless of the obstacles, fear, hatred, or competition, or any aspect of our inner discourse that distances the other. Yet, it seems that his followers may be engaging in the Piglet-Pooh Bear parallel living without deep reciprocal engagement.

William Loader suggests that John is addressing the issue of parallel-living for his own community: "... a major crisis was developing within John's community which needed Jesus' instruction and his prayer - or, at least, the members needed to hear what Jesus would have prayed. The unity was not 'airy-fairy', but relational and practical. After the breakdown has occurred in these relations, we read in 1 John that such mutual love needed to express itself in real ways, in sharing material resources, in deed as well as word (1 John 3:17-18)."

How many of you have watched the movie *Selma* and saw the record of persons who willingly laid down their lives, risking pain and even death for the cause of justice. Truly they personified the meaning of this love of neighbour of which Jesus speaks in this text. In the second march on Selma, one saw not simply black people or Christians; there were people of many races and cultures and religions. There were certainly people from all walks of life bound together by love; love of neighbours that made them willing to move out of their comfort zone, certainly aware, based on previous events at that time, that their presence and participation could result in bodily harm or even death. And yet they came.

Jesus, in our reading today, is inviting us to contemplate what it means that we are deeply connected, as a vine is to its branches, and that each branch shares a common source of life and love with other branches. Jesus says that the best way to express that love, to express our thanks to him in our life, is by serving each other. Showing love to others is the completion of the love Jesus has given to us.

“I have told you these things so that my joy would continue to be in you and that your joy would be complete. This is my command: Love one another as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this: that someone lays down his life for his friends.”

So much of life is transactional. In transactional life, you take action to elicit a favourable reaction from others. If we look within, most of our activities, actions, and relationships are transactional. In them, we seek to succeed, satisfy our egos, maintain our status, feel less lonely, earn money, give a good life to our families, and so forth.

At its core, friendship should always be about being there for the people you love without expecting anything in return. And in a world where everyone wants something from you, finding friendships where nothing is ever expected of you can be a blessing. We do not show love to someone to get something in return. We show love to someone just to love them, to sacrifice for them.

For Jesus, love for one’s friends entails sacrifice —a willingness to *“lay down one’s life”* (John15:13). In one sense, this laying down of life points forward to Jesus’ crucifixion, his willingness to place his very body between his beloved ones and the state-sanctioned violence that threatened to kill them.

But in a second sense, Jesus’ command points not only forward to the crucifixion but backward to his washing of the disciples’ feet (John 13:1-20), shortly before he gave them the instruction *“Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another”* for the first time (John 13:34).

In that passage, Jesus models a different way of giving up one’s life, which involves giving up one’s status, letting go of one’s position, shedding oneself of privilege. This is difficult for many of us. I know it’s difficult to let go of our need to control, to let go of positions of power to let go of our privileges.

Yet, this is the love to which Jesus calls us — a love that relinquishes privilege so that others may live. According to this passage, it may be precisely in this giving up of privilege that we ourselves discover what it means to be loved.

Privilege thrives on a mentality of scarcity. It flourishes when we believe there is not enough to go around. It makes us believe that someone else being lifted up means we are being taken down. But our passage does not presume a world of scarcity, but rather a world of abundant love emanating forth from the God who *is* love.

“If you keep my commandments [to love one another], you will abide in my love just as I have kept my Father’s commandments and abide in his love” (15:10).

Again, the language of “abide” or “dwell” (*meno*) suggests that God’s love is as abundant as the very air that we breathe. It is sufficient for us. We can dwell there. It is enough. When we lay down our lives for another, we do not find ourselves deprived of life.

Instead, we are drawn ever further into God’s love, which binds us together with those from whom we have until now been alienated.

Remain in God’s love that was freely given to you.

Remain in God’s love by loving like he loves.

Remain in God’s love because by that love you will be with him forever.

Amen.

Eight Greek Words for Love

- **Eros:** ἔρως (*érōs*) is the Greek word for sensual or romantic love. The term originated from the mythological Greek god of love, sexual desire, physical attraction, and physical love, Eros, whose Roman counterpart was Cupid.
- **Storge:** στοργή (*storgé*) is familial love. *Storge* is the natural love that family members have for one another. Of all the types of love, *storge* might be the easiest to understand. It is the type of love that parents feel toward their children and vice versa. *Storge* also describes the love that siblings feel towards each other, and the love felt by even more distant kin relationships, such as a grandparent for a grandchild or an uncle toward a niece.
- **Philia:** φιλία (*philia*) *Philia* is affectionate love. *Philia* is the type of love that involves friendship. *Philia* is the kind of love that strong friends feel toward each other. However, it doesn’t stop there.
- **Agape:** ἀγάπη (*agápē*) is the highest of the four types of love in the Bible. *Agape* is often defined as unconditional, sacrificial love. *Agape* is the kind of love that is felt by a person willing to do anything for another, including sacrificing themselves, without expecting anything in return. Philosophically, *agape* has also been defined as the selfless love that a person feels for strangers and humanity as a whole. *Agape* is the love that allows heroic people to sacrifice themselves to save strangers they have never met.

- **Mania:** μανία (*manía*) *Mania* is obsessive love. *Mania* is the kind of “love” that a stalker feels toward their victim. As a type of love, *mania* is not good, and the Greeks knew this as well as we do. *Mania* is excessive love that reaches the point of obsession or madness. *Mania* describes what a jilted lover feels when they are extremely jealous of a rival or the unhealthy obsession that can result from mental illness.
- **Ludus:** Bucking the trend, the word *ludus* comes from Latin rather than Greek. In Latin, *lūdus* means “game” or “play,” which fits with the type of love it refers to. One possible Greek equivalent is the word ερωτοτροπία, meaning “courtship.” *Ludus* is playful, noncommittal love. *Ludus* covers things like flirting, seduction, and casual sex. People who are after *ludus* are just looking to have fun or view sex as a prize to be won. A “friends with benefits” situation would be an example of a relationship built on *ludus*: neither partner is interested in commitment.
- **Pragma:** πράγμα *Pragma* is practical love. *Pragma* is love based on duty, obligation, or logic. *Pragma* is the unsexy love that you might find in the political, arranged marriages throughout history. This businesslike love is seen in relationships where practicality takes precedence over sex and romance. For example, two people may be in a relationship because of financial reasons or because they have more to lose by breaking up than staying together.
- **Philautia:** φιλαυτία (*philautía*) *Philautia* is self-love. No, not that kind. *Philautia* refers to how a person views themselves and feels about their body and mind. The modern equivalent of *philautia* would be something like self-esteem (good) or hubris (bad). People with high self-esteem, pride in themselves, or a positive body image practice a healthy version of *philautia*. Of course, *philautia* has a dark side, too. Egomaniacal narcissists who think they are better than everybody else are also an example of *philautia*, but not in a healthy way. The duality of *philautia* just goes to show that love, even self-love, can often get complicated.