

“All You Need is Love”

When I say the word love, what is the first thing that comes to mind? Perhaps it is St. Valentine’s Day, roses, diamond rings, or a wedding. Of course, it could also be your favorite person, spouse, or significant other. I bet there are lots of other emotional connotations to love, including your favorite love song, favorite food as in “I love chocolate,” or pet. What I think we all tend to think of when we think of love is a sentiment or a feeling that we have. I know at least one little girl who hears that word and thinks about a song [sing “Jesus loves me”]

What Jesus and the scribe talk about today is not about a feeling or emotion. It is something even more profound than what we experience when singing that song. When they talk about love it is something almost unemotional. You have heard me talk about how I enjoy working with couples about to be married. While I enjoy learning about the romantic side of their relationship, the falling in love part, what I am most eager to explore with them is the part of love that does not rely on an emotion or feeling good about the other person. That part of love, like the love that Jesus and the scribe are discussing, is the love that is not about self and how I feel but about the other and what we would do for them and sacrifice for them.

We can often tell the importance of something in a culture by the number of words their language needs to describe it. You have probably heard that Inuit culture has more than fifty words for snow. These words give precise information about the snow. They help others know what to expect when they go out into it. In Ancient Greek culture love must have been very important. They have at least eight different words for love while English only has one. I expect you are familiar with some of the Greek words such as *eros* (passionate love), *philia* (deep friendship), and *mania* (obsessive love), there is also *pragma* (committed, companionate love.), *ludus* (playful love or flirtatious love), *storge* (familial love), and *philautia* (self-love). That is a whole lotta love. Finally, there is the word used in today’s scripture *Agape* (ἀγάπη)—universal or empathetic love.

When Jesus and the scribe start talking about loving God and neighbor they are not talking about romance, friendship, passion, obsession, family, playfulness, or self. “*Agape* love involves faithfulness, commitment, and an act of the will.”¹ *Agape* love transcends emotions, desires, passion, and family. *Agape* is what the commandments Jesus gives are calling us to. *Agape* love may start out as *philia* or *eros* or even *ludus* but as the relationship matures the emotion or passion develops the selfless aspects of *agape*. That is what happens in a successful marital relationship.

In relationship with God and our neighbors I doubt that these other types of love come into play. It is the aspect of an act of will that is important for *agape* love to develop. When we love God it is our intention to be in close relationship with the creative forces of the universe. We may say that we love God for all that God has done for us, but the moment we are hit with setbacks, ill health, loss of job, failed relationships and other hardships we end up asking the question the psalmist so

¹ <https://www.gotquestions.org/agape-love.html> on October 30, 2021

often ask, “If you love me why are you letting these terrible things happen to me.” Or “What did I do to deserve this pain and loss.” If our love for God depends on us always getting what we want and having an easy life, the love is unlikely to endure.

The Hebrew word for this kind of love might help us get a better handle on *agape*. The Hebrew word is *hesed* (חֶסֶד). Instead of being translated as simply love in the Bible, *hesed* is most often translated as one word—lovingkindness. But even lovingkindness is rather obscure. Other ways to define *hesed* are “love and faithfulness,” “unfailing love,” “faithful love,” “steadfast love,” and “loyal love.” Like *agape* *hesed* has the aspect of endurance and faith. It is not a love that can or will die as other types of love can. In the Hebrew Scriptures it is usually used to describe God’s love for humanity. That is despite our willfulness, fickleness, and emotionality God’s love does not die. The most human example of *hesed* in the Bible is in the Book of Ruth. Ruth is faithful to her mother-in-law despite the calamity and misfortune they endure. Ruth faithfully follows her mother-in-law’s instructions, and by doing so saves them both from further adversity. What is even more remarkable is that Ruth is not an Israelite. The best example of *hesed* is lived out by someone outside of Judaism.

Whether it is *hesed* or *agape* Jesus calls us to have unfailing love for God and unfailing love for **all** people. As he will tell us in the Parable of the Good Samaritan, even our enemy can be our salvation. This kind of love is hard. The one who most closely approaches it is this scribe. Remember the scribes, Sadducees and Pharisees were the ones who were most often challenging Jesus. This scribe and not one of Jesus’ disciples is the one of whom Jesus says, “You are not far from the kingdom of God.” Like Ruth it is an outsider that seems to get closest to what God calls for and Jesus preaches.

For every Martin Luther King and St. Catherine there is a Mahatma Gandhi and an Anne Frank whose message may get through to us because they are not one of us. We are best served when we look past the person to the meaning that person shares. Where we hear words of *agape* love, and *hesed* love there too is God. Also note that the four names I mentioned were all martyrs for what they believed in and tried to share. The cultures of the world do not take kindly to this kind of love, because it is a love that denies power over others, it is a love that cares for all, it is a love that does not distinguish between class, wealth, party, color, race, or any other marker that we humans use to divide ourselves.

It may take an act of will to overcome what we have been taught by the culture from our birth, but it is what Jesus, drawing on Deuteronomy and Leviticus, reminds us is the one invincible power in all the universe—the power of God’s creative, nurturing, and redemptive love. When we tap into that then we too are not far from the heart of God and the kingdom of God.