

THE PRIMARY LOVE LANGUAGE

Let us pray: Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

Perhaps you remember the story Paul Harvey told about the good, honest, and generous family man who just couldn't bring himself to believe that God had really become a human being like us. When the rest of his family put on their coats to go to the midnight Christmas Eve service, he told his wife, "I know you're disappointed that I'm not going with you to the service, but I would feel like a hypocrite. I'll be waiting up for you when you get home."

As the snow began falling harder outside, he sat in his chair next to the fire, reading. Suddenly, he began to hear THUMP, THUMP on the living room window. It sounded like snowballs hitting the glass. When he looked out, he saw some birds flying into the window. He noticed other birds clumped together on the ground. He realized they were trying to get inside where it was warm, but he certainly couldn't open the door and let them in the house. Then he thought about the little barn out back where his children kept their horse. If he could get them into the barn, they would be warm.

He put on his coat and hat and tromped out in the snow. He tried to lure them to the barn with bread crumbs. He tried to gather them up in his arms. He tried to shoo them into the barn by waving his arms. But the birds flew away from him and kept flying into the window. He realized they were afraid of him. "If only I could be a bird," he thought to himself, "and mingle with them and speak their language. Then I could tell them not to be afraid. Then I could show them the way to the safe warm barn. But I would have to be one of them so they could see, and hear and understand." At that moment, the man heard the church bells ringing "O Come, All Ye Faithful" and he sank to his knees in the snow. And, as Paul Harvey used to say, "now you know the rest of the story."¹

In 1992, Gary Chapman published his New York Times Bestseller *The Five Love Languages*. They are: Words of Affirmation; Quality Time; Receiving Gifts; Acts of Service; and Physical Touch. Chapman teaches that, while it's important to say "I love you" with our words, it's perhaps even more important to say "I love you" with our actions. But we have to learn to speak the other person's "love language" or risk being misunderstood. While his book and teachings are primarily aimed at married couples, he makes some valid points that can be applied to all of our relationships. In his introductory chapter, Chapman says, "We must be willing to learn our spouse's primary love language if we are to be effective communicators of love."²

Think about the man and the birds on Christmas Eve – "If only I could be a bird, and mingle with them and speak their language. Then I could tell them not to be afraid. Then I could show them the way to the safe warm barn. But I would have to be one of

them so they could see, and hear and understand.” Think about how our God tells us not to be afraid and shows us the way – “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. . . And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father’s only son, full of grace and truth.” (John 3:16; 1:14)

When one of the scribes asked Jesus, “Which commandment is the first of all?” Jesus answered, “Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one; you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.’ The second is this, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’” If we want to follow Jesus . . . if we want to enter the kingdom of God . . . if we want to be effective communicators of God’s love . . . not only do we need to learn the primary love language, we need to act it out, with God and with our neighbor.

There is a wonderful story about Rabbi Hillel and Rabbie Shammai, two esteemed Torah scholars of the first century B.C. They often disagreed on the interpretation of God’s law. Shammai was much stricter in his understanding, while Hillel tended to be more lenient. Hillel taught his students “to love peace and pursue peace, love all God’s creations and bring them close to the Torah.” One day, a Gentile who wanted to convert to Judaism approached Shammai and asked him to teach him the entire Torah. “But,” said the Gentile, “I will convert only if you can teach me the entire Torah while I stand on one foot.” Shammai was insulted by what he thought was a ridiculous request and threw the man out of his house. The Gentile then went to Hillel and made the same request with the same requirement. Hillel accepted the man’s challenge and said, “What is hateful to you, do not do to your neighbor. That is the whole Torah; the rest is the explanation of this. Go and study it!”³

That sounds like the story of the scribe and Jesus. “Which commandment is the first of all?” And Jesus’s answer can be learned while standing on one foot: “Love God. Love your neighbor.” In Matthew’s version of this story, Jesus adds, “On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.” (Matthew 22:40) The apostle Paul instructed the Christians in Galatia, “For the whole law is summed up in a single commandment, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’” (Galatians 5:14) We hear it echoed in what we call the Golden Rule in Jesus’s Sermon on the Mount, “In everything do to others, as you would have them do to you; for this is the law and the prophets.” (Matthew 7:12) We can imagine Jesus saying to the scribe, “Love God. Love neighbor. This is the whole law. Go and study it! And even more important than that, go and live it!”

In case you need any more convincing that Jesus is talking about “love in action,” remember that Luke’s version of this story also has a lawyer ask Jesus, “What must I do to inherit eternal life?” When Jesus asks the lawyer what he thinks, the man recites the Great Commandment: “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself.” Jesus says, “You have given the right answer; do this, and you will live.” The lawyer should have stopped right there. However, he wanted to justify himself, so he asked, “And who is my neighbor?” Boy, did he get more than he bargained for! Instead

of giving the lawyer a list of people to love, he told the parable of the Good Samaritan. And the rest of the story goes like this: “Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?” He said, “The one who showed him mercy.” Jesus said to him, “Go and do likewise.” Jesus didn’t say, “Go and study the example of the Samaritan and contemplate what it means to be a good neighbor.” He said, “Go and do likewise . . . with everything you’ve got!” (Luke 10:25-37)

Speaking of language, I use a most interesting resource when I read, study, and prepare my sermons, called The Handbook Series. The resource is published by the United Bible Societies and is primarily intended to be used by Bible translators who translate God’s Word into many different languages. A literal translation often doesn’t work when trying to communicate God’s Word and God’s love, because the second language has no words or ideas that correspond. To paraphrase Gary Chapman, a Bible translator has to learn to speak the other person’s “love language” or risk being misunderstood.

For example, in our story today, we hear the command to “love the Lord your God with all your heart,” understood as the seat of emotions and feelings. But in the Kabba-Laka language of the African nation of Chad, the instruction would be “love God with your whole liver.” In the Conob language of a Maya tribe in Guatemala and some parts of Mexico, “love God with your whole abdomen.” In the Marshallese language of the Northern Pacific, it would be “love God with your whole throat.”

We also hear “Love your neighbor as yourself.” We’re no different than the lawyer who asked, “And who is my neighbor?” We want to know whom we have to love (and, if we’re honest, we kind of hope it’s not **those** people). Jesus used the Samaritan as the example of the good neighbor who showed mercy. In the Barrow Eskimo language, the neighbor is “a person outside of your building” (shall we say, outside of our circle? outside of our comfort zone?). In the Tzeltal language which is spoken in the state of Chiapas in southeastern Mexico, your neighbor is “the one at your back and your side.” In the Q’eqchi’ Mayan language of Guatemala and Belize, your neighbor is translated with a word that means “younger-brother-older-brother” and describes **all** of your neighbors in a community. Or, again, in the Tzeltal language, “Feel hurt for your neighbors as you feel hurt for yourselves.”⁴

In other words, as one biblical commentator puts it, “One who loves God is to hold nothing back, not to love God with only part – the ‘religious’ or ‘spiritual’ part – of one’s being, but one’s whole self” and “love of God cannot exist without love for all fellow human beings as its content.”⁵ Now, that’s nothing new. That’s exactly how the Ten Commandments are structured – the first four talk about our relationship with God, the last six describe how we are to treat our neighbors and live together in community. You can’t separate the two! The apostle John says it more bluntly than that: “We love because [God] first loved us. Those who say, ‘I love God,’ and hate their brothers or sisters, are liars; for those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen. The commandment we have

from him is this: those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also.” (1 John 4:19-21)

Much is made of Jesus’s comment to the scribe, “You are not far from the kingdom of God.” Does that mean so close, and yet so far? Missed it by that much? Close, but no cigar? After all, Jesus commended the scribe for his good and wise answer. When we think about other stories of Jesus telling people what it means to be his follower in the kingdom of God, he typically ends with something like, “Go and do likewise” or “Follow me.” It’s not enough to know and speak the right answers. We have to speak the love language of Jesus in what we do. Bishop William Willimon writes, “Truth to tell, few people are turned off by Jesus because of Jesus; most turn away from him because of our pathetic witness. We got the words right, but not the moves. They dismiss us with, ‘You must look more redeemed if I am to believe in your redeemer.’”⁶ That sounds a lot like the story about the famous missionary to India, E. Stanley Jones, who asked Mahatma Gandhi how to naturalize Christianity into India. Gandhi told him, “I would suggest first of all that all of you Christians, missionaries and all, begin to live more like Jesus Christ.”⁷

Love God. Love neighbor. It’s all that easy and it’s all that hard, as the preacher at the Montreat Youth Conference told us every night in Anderson Auditorium. Jesus knew that what he was saying wasn’t easy. It wasn’t easy in his day. It’s not easy today. But it’s absolutely necessary for those of us who call ourselves followers of Jesus to speak the primary love language – not just with our words, but in our actions – if we want to be effective communicators of God’s love in a world that is desperate to hear some good news. No, it’s not easy, but that didn’t stop Jesus from loving us and calling us to love God and neighbor with everything we’ve got.

One more story about the love of God and the love of neighbor. Once there were two neighbors who farmed together. They shared equally in all of the work and split the profits exactly. Each had his own granary. One of the neighbors was married and had a large family; the other neighbor was single. One day the single neighbor thought to himself, “It is not fair that we divide the grain evenly. My neighbor has many mouths to feed, while I have but one. I know what I’ll do, I will take a sack of grain from my granary each evening and put it in my neighbor’s granary.” So, each night when it was dark, he carefully carried a sack of grain and put it in his neighbor’s barn. Now the married neighbor thought to himself, “It is not fair that we divide the grain evenly. I have many children to care for me in my old age, and my neighbor has none. I know what I’ll do, I will take a sack of grain from my granary each evening and put it in my neighbor’s granary.” And he did. Each morning the two neighbors were amazed to discover that though they had removed a sack of grain the night before, they had just as many. One night they met each other halfway between their barns, each carrying a sack of grain. Then they understood the mystery, and embraced with joy. And as God looked down from heaven, he saw the two neighbors embracing and said, “I declare this to be a holy place, for I have witnessed extraordinary love here.”⁸

And now we know the rest of the story . . . Love God. Love neighbor. Go and do likewise. Speak . . . and act . . . the love language of Jesus.

Let us pray:Lord, take us where we surely need to go. Let your love be the lens that lets us see, the power that enlivens our lives, the light that points to the path, and the very grace that saves us. Lord, kindly fill us with your love. Amen.

NOTES

¹Keiki Hendrix, “Christmas Classics: The Man and the Birds by Paul Harvey,” December 17, 2010 at www.everydaychristian.com.

²Gary Chapman, *The Five Love Languages: How to Express Heartfelt Commitment to Your Mate* (Chicago: Northfield Publishing, 1992), p. 15.

³Shoshannah Brombacher, “On One Foot,” at www.chabad.org.

⁴Robert G. Bratcher and Eugene A. Nida, *A Handbook on the Gospel of Mark* (New York: United Bible Societies, 1961), pp. 383, 384.

⁵M. EugeneBoring, *Mark: A Commentary* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006), pp. 344, 345.

⁶William Willimon, “Witness: Telling and showing the news we’ve heard and seen about God,” from *God Turned Toward Us: The ABCs of the Christian Faith*, to be published by Abingdon Press in October 2021. This citation is from a weekly email I receive.

⁷E. Stanley Jones, *The Christ of the Indian Road* (New York: Abingdon Press, 1925).

⁸Bunker Hill, “There Are Times . . .” (Proper 26 (B) – 1997), November 2, 1997 at www.episcopalchurch.org.