

1 John 4:7-21

John 14:15-24

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Preached by Philip Gladden at the Wallace Presbyterian Church, Wallace, NC

GOD'S 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.

In 1992, North Carolina born Baptist minister Gary Chapman published a book that has since been translated into fifty languages and sold more than twenty million copies. The full title of the book is *The Five Love Languages: How to Express Heartfelt Commitment to Your Mate*. In Chapter 1, Chapman writes, “Most of us grow up learning the language of our parents and siblings, which becomes our primary or native tongue. If we speak only our primary language and encounter someone else who speaks only his or her primary language, which is different from ours, our communication will be limited. If we are to communicate effectively across cultural lines, we must learn the language of those with whom we wish to communicate.”

Chapman then describes the purpose of his book, “In the area of love, it is similar. Your emotional love language and the language of your spouse may be as different as Chinese and English. . . My conclusion after thirty years of marriage counseling is that there are basically five emotional love languages – five ways that people speak and understand emotional love.” Rev. Chapman has identified those five love languages as words of affirmation, quality time, receiving gifts, acts of service, and physical touch. Chapman concludes Chapter 1 this way, “If we want him/her to feel the love we are trying to communicate, we must express it in his or her primary love language.”¹

Here’s a Paul Harvey story that has become a Christmas classic. It illustrates what Rev. Chapman means about communicating effectively. In Paul Harvey’s own words: “The man I’m going to tell you about was not a scrooge, he was a kind decent, mostly good man. Generous to his family and upright in his dealings with other men. But he just didn’t believe in all of that incarnation stuff that the churches proclaim at Christmas time. It just didn’t make sense and he was too honest to pretend otherwise. He just couldn’t swallow the Jesus story, about God coming to Earth as a man.

“He told his wife I’m truly sorry to distress you, but I’m not going with you to church this Christmas Eve. He said he would feel like a hypocrite and that he would much rather just stay at home, but that he would wait up for them. So he stayed and they went to the midnight service.

“Shortly after the family drove away in the car, snow began to fall. He went to the window to watch the flurries getting heavier and heavier and then he went back to his fireside chair and began to read his newspaper.

“Minutes later he was startled by a thudding sound. Then another ... and then another. At first he thought someone must be throwing snowballs against the living room window. But when he went to the front door to investigate he found a flock of birds huddled outside miserably in the snow. They’d been caught in the storm and in a desperate search for shelter they had tried to fly through his large

landscape window. That is what had been making the sound.

“Well, he couldn’t let the poor creatures just lie there and freeze, so he remembered the barn where his children stabled their pony. That would provide a warm shelter. All he would have to do is to direct the birds into the shelter.

“Quickly, he put on a coat and galoshes and he tramped through the deepening snow to the barn. He opened the doors wide and turned on a light so the birds would know the way in. But the birds did not come in.

“So, he figured that food would entice them. He hurried back to the house and fetched some bread crumbs. He sprinkled them on the snow, making a trail of bread crumbs to the yellow-lighted wide open doorway of the stable. But to his dismay, the birds ignored the bread crumbs.

“The birds continued to flap around helplessly in the snow. He tried catching them but could not. He tried shooping them into the barn by walking around and waving his arms. Instead, they scattered in every direction ... every direction except into the warm lighted barn.

“And that’s when he realized they were afraid of him. To them, he reasoned, I am a strange and terrifying creature. If only I could think of some way to let them know that they can trust me. That I am not trying to hurt them, but to help them. But how? Any move he made tended to frighten them and confuse them. They just would not follow. They would not be led or shooed because they feared him.

“He thought to himself, 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 ... 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 church bells began to ring. The sound reached his ears above the sounds of the wind. He stood there listening to the bells, *Adeste Fidelis*, listening to the bells pealing the glad tidings of Christmas. And he sank to his knees in the snow ...”²

“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. . . 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 1:1, 14)

“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.” (John 3:16)

“Long ago God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, through whom he also created the worlds.” (Hebrews 1:1-2)

Jesus said, “Those who love me will keep my word, and my Father will love them, and we will come to them and make our home with them. . . and the word that you hear is not mine, but is from the Father who sent me.” (John 14:23-24)

“God’s love was revealed among us in this way: God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him. In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins.” (1 John 4:9-10)

God's love language, then, appears to be a blending of "words of affirmation" ("I shall be your God, you shall be my people" and "See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God; and that is what we are") and "acts of service" ("God loved . . . God gave . . . God sent his only Son.") Contrary to Rev. Chapman's five love languages, God's love language is not emotional, but active. Bible commentator D. Moody Smith puts it this way, "The very definition of love turns upon God's sending, i.e., giving up, his Son for the expiation of sins. Knowledge of God's love is given in God's own deed . . . the love of God is not conceived in the abstract but based upon his concrete, historical deed in the appearance and death of Jesus Christ. The repeated statement that God is love should not be taken to mean that God is love in the sense that God is a feeling, an attitude, an intention, or even an action on the part of human beings . . . the existence and will of God and his action in love toward us through Jesus Christ are the grounds for our knowledge of God's love, and that God's love is the basis for our obligation to love one another."³

Jesus's words are part of a much longer story about his last supper with his disciples. He has told them he is going away and he comforts them and commissions them and promises them another Advocate, the Holy Spirit. In John 13, Jesus tells his disciples, "Little children, I am with you only a little longer. You will look for me; and as I said to the Jews so now I say to you, 'Where I am going, you cannot come.' I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another." (John 13:33-35) And, of course, this morning's epistle lesson ended with these words, "The commandment we have from him is this: those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also." (1 John 4:21)

And there is the direct application of this story from John's gospel to your life and mine today – "those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also." In other words, we must learn to speak God's love language. Even more importantly, we must learn to live God's love language. In 197 A.D., Tertullian, an early Christian writer in Carthage in North Africa, wrote a fifty-chapter, 35,000 word letter known as *Apologeticus*. In it, Tertullian defended and commended the Christian faith to the Roman leaders and the surrounding pagan culture. He described in detail the worship practices of prayer, reading the sacred writings, giving offerings to bury the poor, support orphans and the elderly, and supply the needs of any in want (and not just in their Christian circles). "But," Tertullian wrote, "it is mainly the deeds of a love so noble that lead many to put a brand upon us. 'See,' they say, 'how they love one another,' for they themselves are animated by mutual hatred. 'See,' they say about us, 'how they are ready even to die for one another,' for they themselves would sooner kill."⁴

Jesus said, "If you love me, you will keep my commandments . . . They who have my commandments and keep them are those who love me . . . I give you a new commandment, that you love one another." (John 14:15, 21; 13:34) When I hear "keep my commandments," I automatically think about the lawyer who asked Jesus, "Which commandment is first of all?" and Jesus answered, " '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.’” (Mark 12:28-31)

Recently I had the chance to talk with three Webelos Scouts who are working on their “Duty to God in Action” award. Two of the topics were “Understand the Ten Commandments and How They Apply to Our Lives” and “How Do We Share Our Faith with Others?” I asked the boys to think about the Ten Commandments as a cross shape: the first four commandments have to do with our relationship with God; the last six commandments have to do with our relationships with our neighbors. You can’t separate the two or, as John writes, “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.” (1 John 4:20)

As is true with all of the biblical story, what we do, how we live, what we are called to be as God’s people, is based first and foremost on what God has already done for us in Jesus Christ. The indicative (God loves us in Jesus Christ) leads to the imperative (therefore, love one another). I thought about that conversation with the three Webelos Scouts when I read this comment about Jesus’s words to his disciples at their last supper, “The integral theological and ethical relationship between indicative (God’s love for us) and imperative (our love for others) is the **crux** (my emphasis) of this text.”⁵ Isn’t it interesting and powerful to realize that the etymology of the word “crux” (meaning “the decisive or most important point”) is the Latin word *crux*, which means *cross*? Think about that . . .

In his commentary on Paul’s letter to the Galatian Christians, 4th/5th century A.D. theologian and historian Jerome included a famous story about “blessed John the Evangelist.” According to the story, when John was extremely old and living in Ephesus, he had to be carried into worship by several of his disciples. He was too weak to stand to preach, so they would lay him on a couch and he would share God’s Word with the congregation. Week after week, John simply said, “Little children, love one another.” After this went on for a while, John’s followers got a little irritated and tired of hearing the same thing, so they asked, “Master, why do you always say this?” John replied, “Because, it is the Lord’s command, and if this only is done, it is enough.”⁶

In 1926, Presbyterian minister Daniel Iverson wrote a simple chorus in his pastor’s study at the Howard Memorial Presbyterian Church in Tarboro, North Carolina. We sometimes sing it as a response to our Prayer of Confession:

*Spirit of the living God, fall afresh on me.
Spirit of the living God, fall afresh on me.
Melt me, mold me, fill me, use me.
Spirit of the living God, fall afresh on me.*

Later in the 20th century, Church of England Bishop Michael Baughan heard Rev. Iverson’s chorus and added another stanza – in the words of a hymn history, “in order to move from the individual prayer to a communal prayer for the work of the Holy

Spirit in our lives.” I thought we could sing both Rev. Iverson’s chorus and Bishop Baughan’s chorus to remind us how important it is to listen for God’s love language, to speak God’s love language, and, most of all, to live God’s love language.

*Spirit of the living God, fall afresh on me.
Spirit of the living God, fall afresh on me.
Melt me, mold me, fill me, use me.
Spirit of the living God, fall afresh on me.*

*Spirit of the living God, move among us all;
make us one in heart and mind, make us one in love:
humble, caring, selfless, sharing.
Spirit of the living God, fill our lives with love.*

Let us pray: God of all time and space, through the Word and the Spirit, you continue in eternal love for all beings. Fill us with a deep and abiding awareness of your presence, your call, and your grace in our lives and in our world. Shape us to into the people you have made us to be, in service to you and our neighbors, with the love of Jesus Christ. Amen.

NOTES

¹Gary Chapman, *The Five Love Languages: How to Express Heartfelt Commitment to Your Mate* (Chicago: Northfield Publishing, 1992), pp. 14-17.

²Paul Harvey, “The Man and the Birds Christmas Story,” at www.manandthebirds.com.

³D. Moody Smith, *First, Second, and Third John* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1991), pp. 107-108.

⁴“What Were Early Christians Like?” May 3, 2010 at www.christianity.com.

⁵Smith, p. 111.

⁶John R. W. Stott, *The Epistles of John*, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries, (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1964), p. 49.