

“At One by Love” based on 1 John 4:7-21 and Psalm 118:14-29

Delivered by Pastor Drew Mangione on April 28, 2024, at Shelby Presbyterian Church

Yesterday, Josephine was having some big feelings as we left dinner. I carried her to the car as she cried. I knew what started her tears, but I asked her why she was so upset. I wanted to encourage her to talk about her feelings, but she wasn't ready. She just said, "I don't have the words." My sweet girl was upset, but she didn't know how to express why she was upset.

Have you ever been in a position where you struggled for the right words? It's that moment when you know you are feeling something, but you cannot quite explain it right. Often the words we have available to us are not enough. Sometimes other languages have a concise way to say what we want to say and express ourselves. For instance, when we feel like we are experiencing something again, we borrow from French, to say, "Déjà vu," and then we have a compact way of expressing it.

The New Testament was largely written by native speakers of Aramaic or Hebrew, who then were translating into a second, or I think even in one case, a third language. In Hebrew, there are two words they used which we often translate as "love."

The first is "ahav," and it is the word for a desirous and attracted type of love. It is easy to understand. The second, "chesed," is the one that is harder to define. We have no word in English for this love, the love of God, which is a loyal love, a faithful love, a merciful love, and it is the love that binds us to God in covenant.

In our Psalm this morning, we heard the last line, "Give thanks to the Lord because he is good," and then, "because the Lord's faithful loving mercy endures forever." That "faithful, loving mercy," is "chesed." Sometimes it's translated, "mercy," or "steadfast love," or "loyal love," or "covenant love." Translators even made up a word, "lovingkindness," trying to get it right. It's translated many ways because we have no word like it, but really, no language has a word quite like this.

It's well known that in Greek, there are four words for love, and yet, despite this diversity, not a one of these words at the time of Jesus was a one-to-one translation for 'chesed.' In fact, largely, the New Testament writers followed their predecessors who translated the Old Testament into Greek. They translated "chesed" as the Greek word for "mercy." But that wasn't enough. So, they took the word "agape," which is not well attested in pre-Jesus writings in Greek such as Homer. It had generally meant "to prefer," so the Christians transformed its meaning, redefining it to encapsulate much of what is meant by "chesed."

What we find in our passage today from 1 John is a writer feeling a lot like Josephine last night. He doesn't have the words. Traditionally thought to be the Apostle John, who travelled with Jesus, the writer seems to know what he wants to say, but he doesn't have the right word to say it. Or maybe even, he knows what word Jesus used but knows that his readers will not understand that word in the way in which Jesus used it. 'We prefer because God preferred us first,' is not enough.

And so, John uses the word "agape," or some form of it, 29 times in these 14 verses. He is going all around the concept trying to help us, his first readers and now us today, to understand what he means. In these 14 verses, he gives us a picture of love that goes beyond mercy. It goes beyond anything in the Greek language, to align more with 'chesed,' as a concept to represent the love of living in communion with God and in communion with one another.

What's more, when the English translators of the New Testament encountered this passage, they faced the same challenge as John, but with a different word, "*hilasmon*." Please stick with me as I go through this language explanation. It will come together.

You see, in Greek, "*hilasmon*" means a kind of propitiation, or appeasement, but the translators knew that this word didn't fit what was going on. They were not writing about appeasing an angry God or earning favor with God. So, again they looked to where this word was used to translate the Hebrew bible and what they found was that it was used for the Hebrew word, "*kapher*," meaning "to cover over" or "hide."

And so, William Tyndale made up a new word: "Atonement." He made up this compound word – it is literally "At One Ment." This word's meaning is the means by which we are made at one with God. It's like reconciliation, but it's much bigger, because it is grounded in the temple practice. You see, the cover of the ark of the covenant, where God's Spirit rested, was also the "*kapher*," which is the Mercy Seat, the place where heaven and earth, were at one within the temple, and God dwelled with us.

This is what is so remarkable about this passage and so challenging to us today. Here we have people speaking across cultures to the people then, and still across cultures for us today. We find the bold statement, that when we do not love, we are showing that we do not know God. That's harsh. But then what is love? What is "*agape*"? Does it just mean preference?

"No," says the author of 1 John. He says it means God sending the one and only, the only begotten, eternal Son to share in our humanity and be in the world so we might live through him. Our relationship with God is not rooted in our ability or willingness to love God, but it is in God's love for us first. As John says it is not that we loved God, but that God sent the Son to atone for us, to make us "at one" with God.

Jesus is the "mercy seat" of the temple. He is the one in whom heaven and earth, God and humanity, join as one. In Jesus, God humbly shared in our humanity, our human limits, to live as we live, to die for us on a Roman cross, only to rise again overcoming sin and death, to ascend back to the right hand of God, meaning into the power of God enthroned, to send the Spirit to be with us. The Spirit then empowers us with this love, to love as he loves.

Therefore, John says if God loves us in this manner, we ought to love others the same. When we love one another, God abides, or lives, resides, in us and that God's love is made complete – It is made visible. Therefore, to truly love as God loves is to be like Christ. It is not to be perfect like him or go to the cross to God, but to be like Christ in complete humility, to put others first. God did not need to reconcile the relationship with us for God's own sake, but rather, God did it for us to put us at one with God to put our faith in Jesus – who he is and what he did.

This morning, we baptized little James and welcomed him into the church. In doing so, we bore witness to the seal of the Holy Spirit upon his life. This we call sacrament – an outward sign of an inward grace. That is, we used something tangible, water we can touch and feel, to represent the intangible and likewise invisible and yet very real presence of the Lord Jesus in his life.

In doing so, we proclaimed together the historic faith of the church in the Apostle's Creed. This creed is based on the earliest known baptismal rites, liturgies, and prayers. This creed lays out the

core of our faith for nearly 2,000 years, Namely that we believe, or put our faith in and allegiance to God as Father, Son, and Spirit. What's more, we affirm that the Son entered into a real time in human history, suffered, died, and was buried, only to rise again and ascend. From this, we profess our faith in the Holy Spirit, and all that is made possible by the Spirit. This includes a church that is set apart to be holy. It is catholic in that it is for all people to be part of a community of saints that is in the unity of all who believe. This is also the forgiveness of our sins, a belief in the resurrection and life in the age to come – eternal life.

This may seem like an arcane list of beliefs, but as John points out to us, when we are grounded in this story, which is the humility of God who loved us first, then we are able to see the action of God's love – for love is not a feeling, but action. Jesus cannot command us to love if it is not based in our actions because it is dependent on us feeling a certain way. Love for others is sacramental. It is the visible sign of God at work in us.

There is no fear in love, John says. Love doesn't come through dominating another, convincing an opponent, winning an argument, dragging someone over to your side. No, that is not love. Love is not domination. It's not about getting our way. If we love God, then we should love one another as God loves us.

You see, we might not always have the words to express our faith, but we can be thankful the church has given us the words of these creeds to do that. When we are centered on this with Jesus as our cornerstone, we can bring our faith into every space of life. We do this not by reciting mere doctrines, but by realizing what they mean and living as though we understand God shared in our human life for our sake.

If we truly believed that, what grounds do we have hold something over someone else? What grounds do we have to say, "I'm better than you?" It's safe to say that God is "better than us." And yet, God still came down to be one of us, to be at our level, humbled.

This is challenging. We are challenged by this in life to love and act in a way that reveals God's love. Are we going to be perfect? No. But each time we make the choice to love, we make God's love complete. Back in the time of the King James Translation, the word "perfect" meant complete. But now we hear this word and think of it as, "without blemish or error." We need to avoid getting caught up in modern ideas of perfection because this perfection sustains the ancient shame and honor concept that "I've got to be perfect so everyone sees how good I am."

Instead, get caught up in completion. Each time you choose to do what is right – to love another human being with humility and patience. Trust me. I know how hard that can be, especially having two little ones. But when we love in this manner and make the choice to love each and every time, we make God's love complete. This is the humble love where we do not aim to convince, but to witness by telling others that they are loved because we know God loved us first. That love can pour out from us and out into this world to put us all "at one" with God and one another. Amen.