

biblestudy: march 2017

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Based on the scripture lessons of Cokesbury's Adult Bible Study Series

March 5, 2017 Text: 1 John 4:7-19 “The Source of All Love”

Some form of the word “love” appears twenty-two times in this week’s study text. Although the Greek language uses at least three different words for “love,” it is the same word that shapes these references: *agape*.

There is nothing wrong with other words for “love.” In fact, these forms of love all have the potential of being gifts from God. There is *philea* (brotherly love---recognize “Philadelphia”?). There is *eros* (romantic love---recognize “erotic”?)

But this love to which John calls his readers is *agape*, that self-giving love that does not measure the worthiness of the recipient. That’s the way God loves us and it is the love that we are called to share. How are we able to do it? John answers that question: “We love because God first loved us” (1 John 4:19).

Maybe it is an oversimplification, but one way to determine if an action is *agape* is to ask: “Does it make sense?” More often than not, acts of *agape* love do not make sense in terms of the world’s judgments and even in terms of self-interest.

Marva Dawn wrote a book entitled *A Royal Waste of Time*. She states that worship should be so God-focused that from a human perspective it is a waste of time. Worship would not be worship of God if the quest-

ion is “What did I get out of it?” Worship is worship if it is offered to God without regard for its benefit for us.

That attitude might help us get inside *agape* love. It’s the way God loves. Such love is freely given grace in action.

The writer of 1 John understands that Jesus Christ is the full expression of God’s love (1 John 4:10). And with our acceptance of Jesus as the Son of God, that love begins to live in and through us (1 John 4:15).

During the past week, we began the Lenten journey. Ash Wednesday is the beginning of this voyage to Easter. It reminds us of how *agape* takes shape. It looks like Jesus Christ.

What Someone Else Has Said:

In *What Every Christian Needs to Know about the Jewishness of Jesus* (A-bingdon), Rabbi Evan Moffic writes: “As we noted earlier, love is primarily an action in Judaism more than a feeling.”

Prayer:

As you prepare this lesson, let your prayer begin: “Jesus, Lover of my soul...”

March 12, 2017 Text: Ephesians 2:1-10 “God’s Overflowing Love”

As I write this, I do not know who the President of the United States is. I know who the President is now as I type, but I do not yet know who won the election in November. Is it President Clinton? Is it President Trump? Is it President Somebody Else?

As I write this, I do not know who led the polls in college football. I hope that it was Duke, but it might have been a few miles from Durham, or it could have been Alabama or it might have been Saint Olaf. (Uh, maybe not.)

As I write this, I do not know what the weather was on New Year’s Day. Windy? Rain? Unseasonably hot? I don’t know.

But as you prepare for Sunday’s lesson, you probably know the answer to all three of these questions: presidency, football, weather.

Although guesses about the future can be fun, some things are better known by looking back to see what happened. The writer of Ephesians says that future generations (ages to come) will know of the richness of God’s grace by looking back at us and seeing how God loved us, even us (Ephesians 4:7)!

Looking back! This text is not the only time this theme appears in the

Bible. Look at Deuteronomy 6:20 (“This is what you tell your children about the past.”) Look at Luke 22:19 (“Do this in remembrance of me.”) Look at Psalm 136:23 (“Back then, God showed God’s people steadfast love.”)

The amazing grace is that we are the ones that the future shall look back to and say, “What a bountiful gift God gave them!”

And just when we might begin to take credit for what God has done in our midst, the writer of Ephesians shouts: “This is not your own doing; it is God’s accomplishment” (Ephesians 4:9). Our witness to the future is that God’s promises are true (Ephesians 4:10).

What Someone Else Has Said:

Milford Oxendine, Jr. (*Meet the Lumbee Methodists, Part II*) wrote: “For Wesley, even their human response to God, as well as all others, is made possible by God’s grace. This is good news for all those who are battered, beaten down, and confused by the circumstances of their lives. Their future does not rest on their own strength and ability. Rather, it rests in their God whom they must be challenged to serve and obey.”

Prayer: As you prepare this lesson, let your prayer begin: “Your grace is sufficient...”

March 19, 2017 Text: John 15:1-17 “God’s Love Manifested”

These lessons on God’s love continue. The texts we have recently studied and the ones ahead roam all over the Old Testament and the New Testament. This is not surprising, of course, as the essence of Scripture is to proclaim that God is Love.

What is surprising are some of the words John uses when he writes about God’s love, words such as “removes” (John 15:2) and “trims” (John 15:2). In the case of “removes,” God is addressing those who do not produce fruit. In the case of “trims,” God is addressing those who do produce fruit.

If my pride is trimmed, I am more likely to bear spiritual fruit. If my self-service is trimmed, I am more likely to love more broadly and more deeply. If my prejudices are trimmed, I am more likely to reflect God’s full love. If my---you fill in the blank. A tree that is not trimmed is not going to continue to bear fruit and it is discarded (John 15:6).

When I read John 15:12, I am struck with how broad the command of Jesus is: “Love each other.” When I read John 15:12, I am struck with how narrow the command of Jesus is: “Love each other.”

Yes, that is what I meant to say: broad and narrow. “Love each other” is specific, narrow, and does not allow me to substitute “like each other some” or “just keep the rules.” On the other hand, “Love each other” is broad, open, and ever-changing. Love does not always look the same, so I am always having to ask “What is the loving thing to do?”

One of the key emphases in Jesus’ instruction is John 15:16: “You did not choose me, but I chose you...” In a culture that likes to be given choices (Just how many kinds of cereals are there in that aisle at the supermarket?), we are told that God has taken the initiative toward us. (That’s one reason United Methodist tradition includes baptism of babies.) Jesus did the choosing, so we are not in charge!

continued on page 2

What Someone Else Has Said:

In the novel *Come Rain or Come Shine* (Putnam), Jan Karon has this scene for one of her characters: “‘It’s scary to think of being a wife and a mother all at once,’ said Lace. She had finished blow-drying her hair and was in her pj bottoms and the faded T-shirt that said *Love Is an Act of Endless Forgiveness*”

March 26 2017 Text: Joel 2:12-13, 18-19, 28-32 “God’s Love Restores”

There are a bunch of people in the Old Testament named Joel. (The name means “the Lord is God.”) One of them married a foreign woman and later sent her away with their children (Ezra 10:43). Another was trusted by David to bring the holy Ark of the Covenant to Jerusalem (1 Chronicles 15:11-14). Samuel appointed one of them, his son, to be a judge (1 Samuel 8:2) but the son turned out to be more of a crook than a judge. Over and over again, this name appears—one student of the Bible counted seventeen people named Joel—until we come to the author of this book. This Joel—son of Pethuel (where God dwells)—is the latest of these men and this Old Testament book is considered one of the last books written in the Old Testament. (Some scholars think it might have been written as late as two hundred years before the birth of Jesus.)

The Book of Joel has the tone of someone who is fed up with the sins of Israel. This brokenness has been going on for a long time—remember, this is a prophecy written late in Israelite history—and Joel (speaking for God) is sick and tired of it. Look at Joel 1:5, aimed at those who abuse their bodies with alcohol. Look at Joel 1:19-20 that laments the environmental disasters. Look at Joel 2:9 where stealing from one another is a common thing.

Just about the time the reader begins to think there is no hope for Israel, the prophet “tells the rest of the story.” Joel 2:12 marks a shift in the book. “Yet even now”---yet, in spite of all this sin---yet, even though you have failed so miserably—God invites Israel to repent

Prayer:

As you prepare this lesson, let your prayer begin: “Lord Jesus, You have called us to love as You have loved. Have you got a better offer? Trim us to shape us like love; trim us to give a fresh start for growth...”

and return to the One who is “gracious, merciful, slow to anger, abounding in steadfast love, relents from punishing” (Joel 2:13).

The God who has been so offended by Israel’s behavior promises to give a fresh start. Young people. Old people. Male. Female. All of these can receive a new burst of the spirit of God. (Joel 2:28-29). God offers repentance as the key to forgiveness. The prophet says it is to be more than going through the motions of the traditional tearing of one’s clothes to signal repentance. Let it come from the heart! (Joel 2:13).

The invitation is still good. Our sin is still real, and the promise of God is still real.

What Someone Else Has Said:

In *The Faithful Executioner* (Farrar, Straus, and Giroux), Joel F. Harrington observes: “(They) believed that the corrupting effects of original sin remained powerful even among the faithful. (They) sought...acknowledgment of guilt and submission to the authority of God...The divine judge held out the promise of absolution and thus redemption.”

Prayer:

As you prepare this lesson, let your prayer begin: “Read my heart, O Lord...”



5 Freebies to Grow Ministry By Natalie Bannon

How often do we get something good that is free? Free as in costs nothing, no strings attached and “on the house?” We’re not talking smoothie samples, mattress trials or refrigerator magnets — we’re talking about 5 freebies that will help you do your ministry with planning and purpose. Get the following FREE and useful “helps” from United Methodist Communications!

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2. Demographic Report - You can better fill the needs of your community if you know who is living in close proximity to your church building. To get a free demographic report of your area, send your contact information, church name and street address to Chuck Niedringhaus: CNiedringhaus@UMCOM.ORG, Sr. Director of Research and Local Church Outreach at United Methodist Communications.

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5. Spiritual Gifts Assessment - Last, but certainly not least, identify your God-given gifts for living faithfully. Go to umc.org and take the spiritual gifts assessment. It’s a great way to find out how you can fulfill your purpose, better serve your ministry, at your church and in your day-to-day life.

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