February 5, 2023 Text: 1 John 4:7-21; Ruth 4 “The Tie That Binds”

The answer is 27. The question is: How many times in this text from 1 John does some form of the word “love” appear? Many students of the Bible are familiar with the Greek word ἁγαπή. All twenty-seven uses of “love words” are some form of ἁγαπή. This is the self-giving love seen in God. This is the caring initiative seen in God. This is the undeserved acceptance seen in God. This is the sacrificial willingness seen in God. And we are called upon to love in the same way. As Robert W. Wall has said (The CEB Study Bible): “God is the source and example of true love.”

The Old Testament Book of Ruth shows love that jumps across ethnic lines. The Hebrew Boaz cares for the Moabite Ruth. He knows how to “work the system,” (Ruth 4:6-8) and gets to claim her (Ruth 4:10). Then, the people who heard Boaz’s acceptance of Ruth celebrated and offered their blessing (Ruth 4:13). Out of their marriage came a son (Obed), who became the grandfather of David (Ruth 4:17, 22). Out of the line of David comes the Savior (Matthew 1:5-16). A little love goes a long way!

It is one thing to translate ἁγαπή into English; it is quite another thing to translate ἁγαπή into Twenty-first Century! I keep looking through these verses from 1 John, trying to find the clause that let’s me make an exception on whom I love. The closest “escape clause” I can find is in verse 20. In that verse, I determine that if I am willing to be called “a liar” before God, then I can pick and choose whom I shall love. That’s not much of an option.

Loving someone does not mean that I agree with them. Loving someone does not mean that I want to be like them. Think back over all the people Jesus met. Did He agree with them all? Did He admire all of them? Did He want to be like all of them? Of course not! Did He love all of them? Yes! Yes! Yes!

When Jesus was asked to give an example of how to love a neighbor (Luke 10:25-37), He told a story about a Samaritan who helped a man who had been beaten up by robbers. (I think it is interesting that we call that story “the Good Samaritan,” as if we assume other Samaritans are bad.) But, in the story, love does not come from the people we expect to be caring (priest, v. 31, Levite, v. 32). Love comes from an outsider. I am left to wonder: “Who is trying to love me?”

What Someone Else Has Said:
In S T Kimbrough, Jr.’s book (The Struggle to Believe, Resource Publications), the poet has written: “But we must also be sign and show this love is yours and mine. We too must love the rich and poor; that’s how they’ll know God’s love is sure.”

Prayer:
As you prepare this lesson, let your prayer begin: “God of love, help me to love...”

February 12, 2023 Text: 1 Kings 3:16-28 “A Parent’s Love”

Get out a Kleenex before you start reading this week’s text. What a beautiful story! What an amazing account of a parent’s love! Jesus called God “Abba” (sometimes translated “Daddy”) (Mark 14:36) because He saw there a love that suffers in order to do what is good for a child. It was just the kind of love that our Lord Himself showed when He accepted the cross because it was good for us (Hebrews 12:2).

Did you catch the passing reference at the beginning of the story? The two women were prostitutes (v. 16). We might not be surprised that one of the women was willing to slice the baby into two pieces. After all, aren’t prostitutes people of low morals and sinful behavior? But, how do we deal with the fact that the brave heroine of the story is also a prostitute? Do you suppose God can use persons who are less than perfect? Do you suppose we are defined more by our bottom line values than by our mistakes? Do you suppose that God has grace hidden in the most unlikely places?

Just before this incident, King Solomon had a dream (v. 15) in which God commended him for wanting wisdom more than he wanted wealth (v. 11). The fact that this account comes immediately after that dream suggests that God gave Solomon the wisdom he desired. Have I asked God to give me my Position? Power? Privilege? Prestige? What if I asked God to give me a place to serve, a people to love, and new beginnings possible?

This is strange: a mother willing to give away a son she loves. She does it in order to save his life. She is willing to bear great hurt; she is willing to have great loneliness; she is willing to let go of her own future...and all of it because she loved the son. What is best for him? It is not ideal that he be given to the scheming other woman, but at least he would be given a chance to live.

One more thing. This woman who likes the cruel suggestion that the baby be cut in half with each woman getting half is a mother whose son has just died and he had died because she rolled over on him during the night. Can you imagine the anguish in her heart? Can you understand the self-torment that motivated her? Her dreadful request that the baby be divided comes out of her emptiness and pain. There is room here for sympathy for her crazed hope for half a child. When I see anger in another person do I know what else is going on in their life? Hang onto that tissue.

What Someone Else Has Said:
In The Second Mountain (Random House, David Brooks quotes C. S. Lewis: “To love at all is to be vulnerable.”

Prayer:
As you prepare this lesson, let your prayer begin: “God, You have loved me...”
Friendship is more than just liking someone else. True friendship involves my willingness to go to bat for the other even at damage to me. The story of David and Jonathan in this week’s focal text is an example of the kind of true friendship.

Students of the Bible disagree on some of the dimensions of the love that Jonathan and David had for each other. Did it have a sexual component? In 1 Samuel 20:41, the two men kiss. In 2 Samuel 1:26, David speaks of his love for Jonathan being greater than the love of women. For some, this honors David and Jonathan as a homosexual relationship. For others, they note that the Hebrew word used for “love” in these verses is not the Hebrew word used for sexual love. Maybe we can agree on one point: the sexual nature of the relationship is irrelevant to the quality of friendship.

Jonathan has two competing loyalties: his father, King Saul, and his friend David. Jonathan tries to connect the two; he takes his royal identity and gives it to David (1 Samuel 18:4). David is masterful as a soldier (1 Samuel 18:5), so the king promotes him. That works until the populace begins to celebrate David more than they do Saul (1 Samuel 18:7). This flips the switch for Saul who now tries to get rid of David (1 Samuel 18:10). This “yes” and “no” pattern continues with Jonathan trying to stay in good relationship with his father and with David. (This push-and-shove continues well after this week’s study passages.)

When I was in the eighth grade, as we listened to our teacher explain Peter had just proclaimed that Jesus was the long-awaited Messiah (Matthew 16:16). The problem was that Peter did not understand all of the Christ. I can understand Peter’s failure. When I accept Jesus as my Lord and Savior, I often set aside the implications of that. (Surely He doesn’t mean I am to love my enemies! Surely He doesn’t mean I am to forgive as I want to be forgiven! Surely He doesn’t mean that I am to fight structures that keep people poor!)

Peter just proclaimed that Jesus was the long-awaited Messiah (Matthew 16:16). The problem was that Peter did not understand all that it meant; he did not grasp the part about the suffering and death of the Christ. I can understand Peter’s failure. When I accept Jesus as my Lord and Savior, I often set aside the implications of that. (Surely He doesn’t mean I am to love my enemies! Surely He doesn’t mean I am to forgive as I want to be forgiven! Surely He doesn’t mean that I am to fight structures that keep people poor!)

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