Christian Love

John 15:12-17

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We have a problem in the English language. Well, actually, lots of problems, which is why I always admire people who grow up speaking a language other than English and then do the hard work to learn this language! But the problem I want to look at today is this word “love.” On any given day, we might use or hear this word used in the following contexts:

* I love ice cream!
* I love you, Mom!
* Love: it’s what makes a Subaru a Subaru.
* I love spring but spring doesn’t love me (Allergies!)
* Love your country!
* Or, said by a black, WWII veteran: I loved my country, but it didn’t love me back.
* You’d do it if you loved me.
* I’m so in love with you!

Now, does the word “love” mean the same thing in each of those usages? I don’t think so. It’s common to say that the Arctic peoples have 100 words for snow, so I wonder why we don’t have a hundred words for love? Or could it be that we understand love less than arctic dwellers understand snow?

“This is my commandment,” says Jesus, “that you love one another as I have loved you.” If we assume the main meaning of love has to do with felt emotions, like the greeting card/chocolates/flowers/romcom/romance novels/pop song industrial complex promotes, then we might push back at Jesus. “You can’t ***command*** love; either you feel it, or you don’t.”

But Jesus is not singing a Taylor Swift or Whitney Houston song. This “love,” which he commands, is qualitatively different from any of the kinds of love we noted above. This love has very little to do with feelings or emotions and everything to do with action, with speech, with bearing fruit, with enacting Jesus’ kind of love. Love as a verb.

So, let’ s think for a moment what Jesus’ kind of love looked like while he was in the flesh. “Love one another as I have loved,” Jesus said.

* More than any other single activity in Jesus’ life, he healed. He healed peoples’ bodies, he healed peoples’ minds. Bringing wholeness to people, to strangers, in acts of love seemed central to his life.
* Jesus fed people. He tended to their physical needs.
* Jesus forgave people who needed forgiving. Whether they deserved it or not. And he told his disciples to do the same.
* Jesus helped people understand difficult things; he was a teacher. In fact, “rabbi,” or “teacher” was the name most people gave to him. He wanted people to understand as much as they could about God, and God’s love, and how to love like that, so he taught, any chance he could get to anyone who would listen.
* Jesus advocated for people who were being hurt by other people or systems. Those he healed on the Sabbath against the rules. The foreigners and sinners he ate with, against common practice. The poor. The outcast like lepers. Those being oppressed by a temple system that defrauded them. Women in general.
* Jesus called those doing the oppressing to account, loving them by seeking to open their eyes to the harm they were causing, the love they were denying others. Like tax collectors and religious leaders.
* And Jesus “gave up his life for his friends.” Submitting to death caused by hate in order to rise in a new power of a love we cannot fully understand or completely define, yet a love we are called to imitate.

In these 4 short chapters in the gospel of John in which Jesus’ final teachings are summarized, Jesus says some version of “love as I love” 8 times. In the other gospels, Jesus often calls on his disciples to exercise this active love, acknowledging this is hard, sometimes counterintuitive and requiring sacrifice from us. It may not always be happy work, but it is work that brings joy, something much longer lasting and much more fulfilling.

It also has the power to change the world. Which is the point. Transformation. Of our individual lives. Of the lives of those we know and love. Of strangers. Of the institutions and systems with which we interact. Of what the apostle Paul called the “principalities and powers.” And there’s the rub. Love changes things, including us, and we need to be willing to enter into that kind of change. Everyone who has ever entered into a committed relationship knows that. Everyone who has ever parented a child knows that. Everyone who has ever had a best friend knows that. You are changed by love and you change others by loving them. 27 years ago on Mother’s Day weekend, I stood with my husband and a crowd of strangers at the Philadelphia airport where I met my first son for the first time, as he came off a plane from South Korea and was put in my arms by an American soldier who had escorted him to us. People who have not experienced adoption assume that those who adopt are doing a sacrificial thing to love a child not “their own.” The moment Luke came into my arms, however, I knew I had been changed by love already. “I would die for you,” I whispered to him. I was changed not because I was doing some altruistic thing, but because I opened myself to the possibility of loving in a way I had not loved before.

Perhaps something like that has happened to you. Can we channel that power and live it in such a way that the world around us is changed? Can we believe in the power of love in the face of the power of those who say it is a weak emotion rather than a force for good, for God? That is what Jesus commands, hopes, urges on us with all his power. That is what the Holy Spirit is given to help us, weak as we are, to do. To love as Jesus loved us. Amen.