

## Pastor's Ponderings February-March 2025

*Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude...  
It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.  
Love never ends.*

- I Corinthians 13:4-8

I read recently that “grief is the one essential human experience” that defines what it is to be human. I’m not sure grief is a uniquely human capacity. Dogs seem to visibly grieve the death of a close human companion, and elephants too are said to grieve the death of family member. But certainly, grief is a profound human emotion. It is something we feel deeply, that reaches into some fundamental part of our soul and wrenches at our gut with long enduring pain. Unending pain. Pain that may ease over time but never goes entirely away. But this is because grief is born of another deep and fundamental human emotion: love. We grieve because we love. Our deepest griefs are rooted in our deepest loves. If grief is our most essential human experience it is because love is at the core of our lives. If grief never really ends it is because love never ends.

Love is central in the gospels of the New Testament and central to our Christian faith. When asked what is the greatest commandment, Jesus said “Love God with all your heart and mind and soul,” and then added “the second commandment is like it, love your neighbor as yourself” (Matthew 22:37-39). There were 613 commandments of God in the Jewish scriptures known to Jesus and the Pharisees who asked him which was the greatest. And Jesus brings it all down to love. Love of God and love of others, as well as the implied love of self. As the Beatles famously put it in that catching tune “all you need is love.”

In mid-February we celebrate romantic love with Valentine’s Day; but the love that Paul writes of in I Corinthians and that Jesus speaks of in the gospels is divine love. Most of the New Testament was written in Greek and the Greek word here translated as “love” is “agape,” which is meant to convey a sense of unconditional love with relentless desire for the well-being of the other or even of all others: divine love. The Greeks had other words for love. “Philia” conveyed a kind of love between friends or family members (our word “family” is related to the Greek word “philia”). Eros was used in reference to romantic love with physical attraction (from which the English word “erotic” is derived). The New Testament uses these other words for love in other places, but the love that Jesus names as the greatest commandment and Paul poetically elaborates in I Corinthians 13 is *agape*. Some say this is the love from which other forms of love derive their power. The divine love of God is the love from which all love grows and in which all love, and all life, is rooted. And what the Bible teaches us about this divine love is that it is creative and life-giving (God creates the world and all that is in it and calls forth life over and over and over) *and* it is sacrificial (Jesus ultimately sacrifices his life in the love of God and for the love of all humanity).

Which brings us back to grief. Love gives us our greatest pleasure, and our deepest and most meaningful enjoyment in life. And because of love we experience our deepest pain and have our hearts wrenched with unending grief. Love and grief are two sides of the same emotion and are what make us profoundly human... humans in image of God (as Genesis 1:27 puts it). May we accept and embrace the pleasure and the pain of it all.

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