

LOVE,

Psalm 86:11-17

Rev. Pat Weatherwax

July 17, 2011

INTRODUCTION

In Jude 2, which we have been looking at this month, there are three separate hopes in the salutation- the greeting that opens the letter. They are translated “mercy, peace and love” with the quantifier/qualifier “in abundance”. May they be yours! I love this greeting. I’ve added it to the bottom of my email signature and as a favorite quote on Facebook. Aren’t mercy, peace and love wonderful things to wish for others, and for ourselves?

We covered mercy (leniency, compassion, forgiveness, clemency). We’ve examined peace (safety, wholeness, completeness and well-being in *all* relationships of life.) Those sermon manuscripts are available on the church’s web page if you missed one and want to catch up. This week we get love, and next week “in abundance.” We also will celebrate the baptism of Mykl Bursley next week. A baby is God’s assurance that mercy, peace and love do go on, in abundance!

DEFINING LOVE

Love: A great or warm affection or devotion, a strong positive emotion of regard, to get pleasure from, a deep desire or feeling, to hold dear, to take delight in, a passion.

The Greek word in Jude 2 is *agape*. Ancient Greek had four distinct words for love: *eros* (physical), *philia* (brotherly), *storge* (parent-child type) and *agape*. Of course, as with other languages it is difficult to translate words with specific meanings all the time. But the most common word for God’s love for us is *agape*. The letter of I John is full of the word *agape*. In our standard verse of faith: “For God so loved the world that he gave his only son,” the word is *agape*. The love we are instructed to have for one another, like in Matthew 5:44 when Jesus says to “love our enemies,” and in I Corinthians 13 - the “love chapter,” is *agape*. So *agape* is defined as love that is not dependent on circumstances. It says “I love you because I chose and commit to love you.” This kind of love is about wanting the very best for another person, no matter what

emotions or feelings are in play. That's why we see *agape* being translated as "charity" in the earliest English translations. Charity means giving freely without expecting a return on your gift. For a more in-depth description of *agape* love and its properties, read over 1 Corinthians 13. Love is patient, kind, does not demand its own way, is not jealous, envious, rude, etc. Or go to a wedding, 'cause it's often read and reviewed there.

Interestingly the new favorite for wedding scriptures is from Song of Songs 8:6-7: "Place me like a seal over your heart. Love burns like a blazing fire, like a mighty flame. Many waters can't quench love." I'm 3 for 3 using that text this year at weddings!

Of course in Song of Songs it's a Hebrew word for love, of which there are generally two: *ahab* and *hesed*. Love in the *ahab* sense is closest to the English meaning of love and is the love between people, (husband and wife, parent and child, friends) or of people toward God. More rarely it may also refer to the love of God toward people.

Hesed is more commonly translated as kindness, but it assumes a hierarchy, where one in the higher position is giving the love, the *hesed*. The word is most often used in the sense of God's love to kindness toward people and people's mercy or kindness toward others. But we don't love God "*hesed*" because we don't have power over God. *Hesed* often is translated as "steadfast love" and sometimes as mercy or compassion. It's the word used in Psalm 86, so this type of love fits well with Jude 2.

GETTING LOVE

I'm not sure if we would have a world without God. It might be that the steadfast love of God is what keeps us alive and keeps the earth in orbit. I'm linear. I don't have one lick of artistic talent. I wish I had some, but I don't. I think that's why the vivid imagery of a song, "The Love of God," completed in 1917, really helps me understand the impressive nature of the love we experience from God.

Our English lyrics are based on a rather lengthy Jewish poem "*Hadamut*," which was written in Aramaic in 1050 by German/Jewish cantor Meir Ben Isaac Nehorai. It's

been translated into at least 18 languages. The story behind the hymn is that the ancient poem was adapted by a patient in an insane asylum. The words had been penciled on the wall of his room. The general opinion is that he must have had some moments of sanity! In English we hear:

Could we with ink the ocean fill,
 And were the skies of parchment made,
 Were every stalk on earth a quill,
 And every man a scribe by trade-
 To write the love of God above,
 Would drain the ocean dry.
 Nor could the scroll contain the whole,
 Though stretched from sky to sky.

We surely can't say "It's NOT big enough" when describing God's *hesed* steadfast constant huge love toward us. Just as surely you can not say your mistakes, your sins, are too big for God to forgive you and love you. No fault of yours can be bigger than the love of God; that's God's amazing love, amazing grace. Thanks be to God!

GIVING LOVE

We love because God first loved us. Again, the most common word of love in the New Testament is *agape*. In the story of the Good Samaritan, who showed love (*agape*?) to the stranger. Who are we to help and love? Everyone. Is it easy? No. Did God promise it would be easy to love everyone? No, God promised that this life would be hard. At the end of Romans 8 we can read that hardship and distress and persecution and peril and death and life and rulers and present things and future things and powers, and many things, in fact, all of creation, may try, but nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

But then we hear we are to love as God loved us, without logic, without limits, without considering merit. "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, strength and mind, and love your neighbor as yourself." And Jesus explained that there are no

limits on who your neighbor is. Sorry, we don't get to choose IF we are to love. We aren't able to hate some and love others. Jesus didn't give that option. He just said "love".

I heard a story from the terAvest family about Jan back in the Netherlands, in the late 1930s or early 1940s. Maybe you have seen movies like "Schindler's List" or read similar stories: "The Diary of Anne Frank" or the books by Corrie tenBoom. The German military were moving through the cities and towns, taking away the Jews for extermination. Some Christians felt that resistance was futile, but others found ways to protect their Jewish neighbors by hiding them or hiring them or helping them conceal their religious identity. John terAvest knew that the city records identified people by their name, address and religion. There were hundreds of citizens who were at risk. He prayed for the answer and felt that God wanted him to destroy the records; he did. Was there gain for him? No, in fact there was significant danger for Christians who protected Jews. But God taught "love your neighbor," even your Jewish neighbor. The love of God makes us bold. Or at least it can, if we listen and choose to love.

I know I'm naive. I don't understand a lot about charity. But I think I understand what God teaches about caring for others. You don't have to agree, but I agree with Mahatma Gandhi, who used to put the matter quite bluntly: "when another person's welfare means more to you than your own, only then can you say you love. Anything else is just business- give-and-take."

If your motive is to love like Christ- who wasn't here to give and take- then look at our world. "Love Wins" when everyone knows the security we know, has access to health care like we have, has adequate food and clean water like we do . And "They'll Know We Are Christians by Our Love." Love is different. Yes, it's a gift from God and a foundation for good relationships. But love also is a call to action. May mercy, peace and love be yours in abundance. AMEN.