

Acts 10: 44-48
John 15: 9-17
May 10, 2015
Hamilton Union Presbyterian Church

In the early 1980's Tina Turner had a big hit with a song titled, "What's Love Got to Do with It?" To me the answer depends on what the "it" is. In the song the "it" has to do with the relationship between two people. In this setting we could suggest three replies: love has *everything* to do with *it*; love has *something* to do with *it*; and love has *nothing* to do with *it*. The implied response in Tina Turner's song is that love has *nothing* to do with it. It is a "second hand emotion." Yet we are suspicious because at the end of the refrain she asks, "Who needs a heart when a heart can be broken?" I believe we are meant to hear the cry of a heart *that* wants to believe that love has *everything to do with it*; but which has suffered betrayal of the trust that love implies, and has therefore chosen to reject the importance of love out of self-protection.

I believe that in the big picture, love does have everything to do with *it—whatever it is*. As the apostle Paul says to the Corinthians, if we do not have love as our deepest motive and desire we have and are *nothing*. Yet the practical reality of daily experience is that in fact love has *something* to do with *it*. Love may have everything to do with *it*, but the day to day experience is often one of day to day emotional and material survival. The warm, fuzzy and joyful experience of love is a luxury which sometimes feels like an elusive dream.

All of us gather here with the experience of love as some ideal or feeling which on many days is not our reality. And, if we happen to be followers of Jesus where we are supposed to be loving all the time, never be angry or judgmental, resentful or jealous, arrogant or rude; where

we are to believe all things, hope all things, endure all things, we feel defeated and despairing that we can ever truly love or be loved. Love has *something* to do with daily life; but the reality is that what gets us through the day is often sheer determination and often stubbornness.

So how are we to respond to Jesus when he tells the disciples, “This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you?” Clearly this appears to be impossible. Why does Jesus ask the disciples to do something at which they cannot succeed? It is here that we must return to Tina Turner’s question. Only this time we must ask, “What is the *love* which has to do with *it*?”

Last week we heard about three words in Greek which are translated “love” in English. We learned about *eros* which embraces far more than sexual experience and expresses the wonderful passion for life. We learned about *philia* which expresses the highest and most tender relationships among people: *loyalty, respect, friendship, companionship, self-sacrifice, honesty, vulnerability, reciprocity, compassion and empathy*. *Philia* represents the best of which we human beings are capable as mortals. We must never stop aspiring to grow toward these high and virtuous qualities.

And then there is the Greek word *agape*. In the New Testament it is *agape* which is the primary word used to speak about the *love* which has to do with *it*. Last week I used the language of C.S. Lewis to describe this love. He calls it “gift” love. It is a love that is given “just because.” This love has no self-interest. This love has no agenda. It has no desire to make anyone do anything. It is given freely and without condition. That is what makes this love a *gift*.

In the Bible in general and the New Testament in particular *agape* or “gift love” originates exclusively with God. God created the heavens and the earth in a massive and

creative display of *agape*. He created human beings to appreciate and enjoy this gift and to find their highest joy in saying thank you—not with words so much as in living lives filled with awe and gratitude so that God could have the pleasure of having his creation be a source of joy *to the creation*. Again on this day when we celebrate mothers we recognize that the greatest gift any child can give a parent is to experience their life as a gift.

Sadly the Bible tells us that God's first children did not appreciate this gift. Being a child of God was not enough. They wanted to be *like God*—meaning, of course, that they wanted to be *equal with God*. God let this happen because God loves with *agape love*. On one level the man and the woman got what they wanted—the knowledge of the difference between good and evil and the belief that they could control their lives. Yet what actually happened was tragedy. They lost that innocent and unselfconscious relationship with God where they knew they were loved *just because*.

But because, as John writes in his first letter, "*God is love*" God continued to love humanity. In the end "God loved the world so much that he *gave* his only son, that everyone who believes in him shall not perish but have everlasting life. God sent the son into the world not to condemn the world; but that through him the world might be saved." (John 3:16-17)

It is here that we get to the heart of *agape* love which C.S. Lewis calls "gift love." It was an act of grace and mercy. On our own we can never return to the time when we were, in the words of Genesis, "naked and without shame." But in a supreme act of gift love God sent Jesus in the world, heart of his own heart. It is dangerous to attribute feelings to God; yet imagine what this meant. God is not naïve. God did not think that people would just naturally welcome Jesus and repent of their terminal self-orientation. Indeed God saw at a glance that the

presence of Jesus and pure gift love would be incredibly threatening to the reign of self will. He saw at a glance that in the end this ultimate expression of gift love would be rejected and the One who brought the gift would be killed.

But here is what we call the Gospel, the Good News. Knowing all this, God determined that our rejection of Jesus and the gift love he brought and *was* would not maintain the separation. God determined that the rejection would actually *overcome* the chasm and *unite* God and humanity once again. *The very rejection of Jesus and his death on the cross accomplished our being restored in God's eyes to our original relationship as his children.*

I believe that all of us will find this out when we die. But whether or not that is the case, we have a choice. We can hold on to our self-orientation and strive to make it through life. *Or*, we can accept the gift. We can renounce our need to be in control of our lives and instead to grow as beloved children of God who know they are loved *just because*. This is the love that God sent in Jesus. It is the love with which Jesus loved and loves us. It is the love with which he would have us love one another. But we must first accept that love into our hearts. We must receive the love which has *everything* to do with *it*. Amen.