

**The Languages of Love  
(John 15:9-17)**

5/5/24  
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**Orientation**

This morning Jesus gives his followers and us the clear command to “love one another”. He gives it as part of his farewell discourse; a long speech he gives to his disciples before he is taken away to be crucified.

His words are very much like something an elderly family or community member would say in passing on his or her most heartfelt convictions as a gift to the next generation. It is the kind of event I think we can identify with through our own experiences of separation; which is partly why I think it is so powerful.

You can see that we are not actually in Lent and so, not coming up on the crucifixion in the religious calendar. But the “farewell discourse” does double duty. Because we are coming up on Ascension, which is in the middle of this coming week.

Ascension is the end of the period following the resurrection, when Jesus appears to his disciples. and he ascends into heaven. So it is like a second goodbye, until he will come again in the form of the Holy Spirit to start us on the season of Pentecost, two Sundays from now.

## The Commandment to Love

So now, before ascending into heaven, Jesus is telling his disciples and us, to “love one another.” And it sounds so simple and basic when he says it. If you can imagine one of your own elderly relatives on his or her deathbed taking your hand and asking you to do the same, to take care of mother and sister and little Johnny, and help out the neighbors, you would say, “Of course, of course I will” What else would you say?

And yet there are times when we scratch our heads and wonder why, if loving each other is so straightforward and is such an obvious a thing to do, the world is so consumed by anger and bitterness and hatred. Sometimes, we wonder whether we even know what love is at all.

When Jesus defined love in this passage, he gave us a general example. He said, “There is no greater love than to lay one’s life down for a friend.” It sounds like a extreme statement to make! Quite a frightening challenge, in fact. After all, most of us just want to live a gentle and peaceful life and to avoid life threatening situations altogether. Who wants to put their entire life on the line in one moment?

Once I heard about a soldier in Vietnam who jumped on a grenade to save his friends. It must have happened in an instant. Or more recently I heard Sterling talking about someone who followed the tradition of a captain going down with his ship; he refused to leave until he knew that everyone on board had been taken

care of. And then there is the example of Jesus, who was put to death on the cross, because he refused to compromise God's love in order to save himself.

These are all examples of "laying down your life for a friend." They are all climactic moments where everything is on the line. And we can agonize over how we think we ourselves would respond to that test. But it is impossible to know for sure unless we find ourselves in that kind of situation.

Most of the time we are not in that situation. What about love as a daily practice? What does it mean to lay down our lives for our friends in situations that are not a matter of life and death, but part of the course of our ordinary daily life; where our sacrifices are mostly small and seem hardly noticeable?

### **The Love Languages Book**

Several years ago I came across a book which is not really a religious book, but one that I think can help us understand how love works in such everyday situations. It was called "The Five Love Languages" by a self help guru named Gary Chapman. And in it, he describes 5 different ways (or languages) that people use to try to communicate their love for another person.

The book was primarily intended for couples. But it can also be helpful for all kinds of non-romantic relationships, like the ones we have in our congregation or in the

or our daily round. And it is an interesting book to help us think about the loving as a daily exercise.

The five love languages Chapman describes are:

1. Words of affirmation. In other words, using words to build up the other person. Words like “thanks for taking out the garbage” or “I like the way you did that.” *rather than*, “It’s about time you took the garbage out. You didn’t think the flies were going to carry it out for you, did you!?”

2. Gift giving is the second language. A gift tells the other person that you are thinking of them and giving them something to show them that your appreciation. It’s more of a nonverbal, action oriented communication.

3. Acts of Service is the third. Doing something for the other person that they would like. Cooking a meal, washing dishes, vacuuming a floor, fixing the car. You could extend that directly to tasks done around the church. It is a very practical love language; but perhaps not so intimate.

4. Quality Time. Giving the other person our undivided attention. Taking walks together, leaving the TV off and listening in order to take in their words as they speak.

5. And the fifth area is physical touch, like giving and receiving hugs.

Chapman’s book argues that during our growing up years, each of us is socialized to give and experience love in some of these languages moreso than in others. So, for example, If we had huggy parents, we would naturally grow up to show our love and feel loved through touching and being touched by others. And we might also experience the absence of touch as an absence of love.

On the other hand, if our parents were not physically affectionate and instead showed their love for us by working hard to put food on the table and by providing for our daily needs, we might have grown up believing that Acts of Service are a better indicator of love and we might even feel that touching and being touched is unnecessary extra fluff.

According to the book, problems arise when we assume that others are attuned to the same love languages that we are, when that is not necessarily the case. We can end up trying to express our love for another person in a language that person doesn't actually recognize as love. Or the other way around, we may feel unloved because we don't recognize their efforts to love us. When you look at it this way, it's easy to see how wires get crossed and people can come to see each other as unloving, even when both parties have tried so hard to do right by each other.

### **What does this have to do with Church?**

Even though the 5 Love Languages is not a religious book, It's not hard to find examples of Chapman's different love languages in scripture.

Particularly powerful, when it comes to physical touch, is the way Jesus interacts with people who are considered untouchable. Again and again the miracle of healing begins when he reaches out to touch the person he is speaking to.

Or take the passage where Jesus washes the feet of his disciples. In washing and drying their feet, he engages in service and gift giving. These are expressions of the

second and third love language. The foot washing also involves physical touch; the fifth love language and giving them Quality Time, the fourth love language. And all the while he is speaking to them with words of encouragement, which brings in the first love language. All five love languages are contained in this passage, which may help explain why the foot washing story has spoken so powerfully to so many people through the ages.

### **To Lay Down a Piece of One's Life**

I think that by identifying these different ways of loving and getting us to think about which ones we are good at, and which ones we are not so good at, is very helpful. It helps us to understand why sometimes we work so hard at loving, and can't understand why it isn't working. And that tells us what we can improve on.

The love languages also help us to see that there are many ways in which we can lay down our lives for our friends and neighbors every day in small ways. Our lives don't have to be defined the hypothetical question of whether we would jump on a grenade to save our buddies.

The reality is that, for the most part, our lives are defined by the way we speak the languages of love in our daily lives, over the course of time. We can love others easily and naturally in the languages that are familiar to us and at the same time we can work on learning to love and recognize love in the ways that were not familiar to us growing up.

For example, I didn't grow up with a lot of verbal affirmation. My parents didn't say things like "Well done! You did great!" I was rarely praised for anything and rarely thought of giving anyone praise. And so, even today, I have to be reminded that giving compliments is a thing!

Still, even though I have this and many other gaps in my upbringing, I remember my parents as very loving and devoted to us children. And looking back, I can see that they loved us in the love languages that they were familiar with. I didn't miss being praised, because it wasn't part of our family vocabulary. I guess that they were blind to that particular love language and passed that blindness on to me.

But when it comes to doing a chore for someone else or giving a hug, these are ways of loving that were emphasized in my childhood and they come more naturally to me. I'm an A+ at washing dishes by hand and I enjoy cleaning up, for example. It is one way I express love in a way that feels safe to me.

The point is that we love differently in ways that make some people feel more loved than others. And there is a lot of room for misinterpretation and division, even when all sides are being sincere. And that awareness in itself is valuable! It gives us a good reason for being slower to anger and quicker to forgive.

Each of the love languages described in Chapman's book stands for a different way in which in a small and seemingly ordinary way, "we lay down our lives for our

friends” But just because these are comparatively small examples, doesn’t mean they are insignificant.

I’d like to end with two quotes that make this point. One is by someone named Scott Adams: “Remember there is no such thing as a small act of kindness. Every act creates a ripple with no logical end.” The other is by JRR Tolkein in the “Hobbit”, who said, “I have found that it is the small everyday deed of ordinary folk that keep the darkness at bay. Small acts of kindness and love”.

I don’t pretend to be a particularly courageous person. I don’t know whether I would jump on a grenade to save the people standing around me, if it came to that. What I do know is that, with every day given to us, we can push the boundaries of our courage just a little bit more, to exercise our ability to love and communicate that love to others in the languages that are available to us.