

"The Gift"

Mark 12:28-34, Ruth 1:1-18

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"We love, we give ourselves, because God first loved us and gave himself for us."

There are a lot of things that the Bible does not talk about. Many things that are part of our experience that are just never mentioned in the pages of the Bible. Baseball, for instance, or football for that matter. Never mentioned in Scripture. Cats are never talked about in the Bible, did you know that? The Bible never says anything about the Grand Canyon or anything else in North America, or South America either. But that's foolish, isn't it? The writers of the Bible had no experience of the Americas, so how could they say anything about them? But what about love? The Bible doesn't say very much about love. Now you think I'm off my rocker, right? The Bible talks all the time about love. It's a book about love, isn't it? Well, yes. In a way. The Bible talks about God's love for us, about how we should love each other, love our neighbors, love for the stranger. But it doesn't say much about romantic love. About falling head over heels in love, about the candlelight, and violins kind of "I can't live without you," kind of love. It doesn't say much about being in love. There are a few hints at it, but does the Bible ever say that Adam loved Eve? Or how about Abraham and Sarah, were they in love? Or David and Bathsheba? I doubt there was true love there, it sounds to me like lust. But what about Mary and Joseph, did they love each other? One hopes so, but it never says. The Bible mentions that Isaac loved Rebekah and that Jacob loved Rachel, but were they really in love as we know it? Did Rebekah and Rachel love them back? The Bible never says. Paul tells us that husbands should love their wives, but he means love as a verb, an action, and that's usually what the Bible means. Love each other means to act lovingly toward each other, it doesn't really have anything to do with how you feel. Love means how we treat each other, not do we have warm fuzzies and light heads and want to buy each other roses all the time. The Bible just doesn't talk that much about that kind of love, about being in love.

That comes to be a problem sometimes when I'm planning a wedding ceremony with a couple. They

need to choose a scripture lesson or two for their service. Every service in the church, whether on Sunday morning or a wedding or a funeral shall have a time of the proclamation of the Word. There will be scripture reading. So what does one choose for a wedding? The most common one that couples choose is the one from I Corinthians 13. You know the passage, "Love is patient, love is kind, it is not jealous or boastful or arrogant or rude. It doesn't insist on its own way. Love rejoices in the truth," etc. It's a great passage, of course, one of the high points in all the New Testament. Of course it has nothing to do with a wedding, or even about the love between two people. It is part of a passage about how to get along with one another in church. It's about how Christians should treat each other. We're supposed to be patient and kind to each other. Of course if we do that in our marriages, all the better, but Paul is talking about church.

One of the other passages that couples will sometimes choose is the one we read from Ruth, "Do not press me to leave you or to turn back from following you! Where you go, I will go; Where you lodge, I will lodge; your people shall be my people, and your God my God. 17 Where you die, I will die— there will I be buried. May the Lord do thus and so to me, and more as well, if even death parts me from you!" Which is another wonderful passage, but it has nothing to do with marriage. It's from Ruth to Naomi, her mother-in-law. Now I know it's exactly how all of you have felt about your mother's-in-law, but it's not really about a wedding is it? But it is about love, even though the word love is not mentioned. Because it is about one person giving herself totally into the hand of another. To give all of oneself. Isn't that love?

We can say that the Bible doesn't speak too much about love, but we really mean that it doesn't speak too much about romantic love. The problem is that in English we only have one word for love. In Greek, the language of the New Testament, there are four words for love. They differentiate between the natural affection that a child has for a parent, or for the attachment between two friends, or for the head over heels romantic falling in love, or for the self-sacrificing kind of love. All those loves are good and wonderful things, gifts from God. But when the Hebrew Scriptures command us to "Love

the Lord with all our heart, and soul, and mind, and strength,” it is this final kind of love, in Greek, “Agape” that we mean. It means to give one's self to another, even when it costs, even when we don't get anything in return, even when the one to whom we give isn't receptive of our love. That's the love that we are called to give to God and called to give to one another. It's not a feeling of wanting to be protected by a caring parent, it's not the easy comfort of a friend, it's not the warm, light-headedness of being in love. It's not a feeling at all. It is acting for the other's good, even sometimes at the expense of our own, because we value the other. Why would we do that? Why would we act that way when it may cost us something?

Well, there are two reasons actually. We love that way, we give ourselves totally, because that's the way God loved us. In Jesus Christ, he gave himself totally to us, even when it cost him his life. As St. Paul says, “But God shows his love for us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.” The meal that we share today is a sign of that love. We participate in that love when we celebrate communion. We remember the broken body and the blood that was shed on our behalf. We give ourselves in love, because he first loved us. Even our stewardship commitment is a sign that we give ourselves, and give ourselves totally, in thankful response to God. When we pledge our finances for the next year, we are really pledging ourselves, to give ourselves in love, to one another and to God. And secondly, we give because that's the kind of world that we want to live in. Not one that is filled with selfishness, with greed, and envy, and mistrust, and fear. We want to help make this world different. Remember the old story of the man who was granted a vision of the afterlife? He is first shown a great hall with a long banquet table filled with the most wonderful things. People are seated at the table but they are crying and weeping and moaning in their hunger. That's when the man notices that the people at the table have no elbows, just straight arms, and no matter how hard they try, even though they can reach the food, they can't put it in their mouths. They sit together, side by side and across from each other in mutual misery.

The man's guide turns to him and says, “This is Hell.”

The visitor is then taken to another place and see an identical banquet table set with the same wonderful food and drink and the diners there also have straight arms with no elbows. Only here the people are well fed and happy, laughing and singing. "This," says his guide, "is Heaven."

The man is baffled. "But there's no difference!" he says.

"Oh, yes," says his guide, "in heaven they feed each other."

Heaven is where we give ourselves to God and one another, because he has given himself to us, and shown us that's the kind of world he intends. The church, our church, at its best, does the same.