

## Where's the Love?

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When I told my son that my next worship message would be on the Advent Sunday with the theme of love, he said that would be interesting since I'm not an "ushy, gushy kind of person." I responded, "Love doesn't have to be that way," which started me thinking about all the different ways we think about love.

Love has been reduced to such a small word. I think that love has been overly commercialized to sell products, movies, TV shows, and books. We love pizza! We use heart emojis to signify that we love something online. We love all the heart-warming Christmas shows that have become tradition to watch between Thanksgiving and Christmas. The syrupy sentimentality makes me want to grind my teeth! But then I read the scripture for today, where is the love there? I also started to think about the words on the cover of the bulletin today: Do I believe in love even when I don't feel it?

The best examples of two different kinds of love in my life would be the love I feel for my family and my life-long love of reading. My family was the first source of love that I experienced. None of my family members are overly demonstrative, and it isn't often that we say we love each other, but our love is deep and has been proven true over time and through many adversities. My parents demonstrated love for me when at twenty-four, I told them I was pregnant and would be doing it alone. They both said, "Come home." That was it. No expressions of disappointment, no recrimination—just come home. Their lack of hesitation in supporting me was one of the most solid demonstrations of love that I have experienced.

Having a child has given me a wider appreciation of the scope of love. My son and I usually say "I love you" when we talk on the phone or when I'm leaving to go home after a visit with him. I don't remember when this started, but over the years as he was growing up, I made it a point to tell him I loved him—even when he was driving me absolutely crazy. There were even times when I told him that I loved him but that I wasn't liking him very much right then, depending on his behavior.

The second kind of love is my love of reading. I can remember the first time I visited my elementary school library. I started reading all the time. I read during school, even when I was supposed to be listening to the teacher. I read on the school bus and at home when I was supposed to be washing the dishes or some other chore. I read before bed and in the car when we would go on trips. This drove my mother crazy and made my sister car sick—all bonus points

when you're a teenager. I borrowed books from the library, and I bought books. I couldn't tell you how many hours I spent either at the library or at our local Mr. Paperback store. I would—and still do—sometimes have two or three books going at the same time. Now I use the cloud library for eBooks, an app for audio books, and I still go to the library for “real” books. I like books that make me think, books that make me laugh, and sometimes books that make me cry. I've stopped reading some books because something about them irritated me. (Poor editing is one of those things.) But those irritations don't dim the love I have for reading, any more than Christopher's teenage behaviors dimmed the love I felt for him.

The scripture for today from the Gospel of Matthew tells the story of Joseph being told by God's angel to go through with his betrothal to Mary and be a father to the baby she's carrying. There's no mention of love here. The writer of Matthew doesn't say that Joseph loved Mary or even that he had any affection for her. Joseph's feelings seem to be irrelevant. If anything, one could infer that he might have been feeling angry, disappointed, or hurt, since he had decided to end his engagement to Mary. That would have been his right, since she was pregnant with a child who biologically was not his. He would have been justified under the law to do just that. But there is an intervention, Joseph obeys, and the rest—as they say—is history.

Neither of the scripture passages read this morning, from either Matthew or Isaiah, mention love of any sort. There is no Hallmark moment, no hearts, no flowers, no Joseph on his knees pledging undying love to his future wife. This is most certainly not First Corinthians 13, where love is spelled out in all its glory. No, you have to dig for the love here. In my digging, I revisited The Bible Project's videos about love.<sup>1</sup> In one video, from last year's Advent series, love is a conscious choice, and the other video focused more on Old Testament teachings where love originates from God and just is. No beginning and no end. God's. Love. Is.

The first chapter of Matthew's Gospel lists the generations between Abraham and the Joseph of Nazareth, so I believe it's safe to say that Joseph was a devout Jew who attended synagogue and was familiar with the Torah and what we would call Old Testament teachings. It's not a stretch to think that he was devout, since the priests taught from Deuteronomy 6:5, which says, “Love God, your God, with your whole heart: love him with all that's in you, love him with all you've got!” They also taught from Deuteronomy 10:12, which says, “follow the road he sets out for you, love him, serve God, your God, with everything you have in you.”<sup>2</sup> (The Message). So when Joseph dreams that an angel tells him to take Mary as his wife, he does so for love of God.

The Bible Project explains that the Hebrew term for love is *ahavah*, which means affection.<sup>3</sup> This is shown in parental love, brotherly love, or even loyalty. In the New Testament, *ahavah* is

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<sup>1</sup> The Bible Project, <https://bibleproject.com/>

<sup>2</sup> All Scripture quoted from *The Message*, by Eugene H. Peterson (2018).

<sup>3</sup> The Bible Project, <https://bibleproject.com/explore/video/ahavah-love/>

translated from the Hebrew into the Greek word *agape*, which means love in action or seeking the well-being of others and showing love by how you treat them. This is the love Paul talks so much about in his writings. Joseph is displaying this agape love through his obedience and love of God when he puts Mary's welfare above his own personal pride, treating her with dignity and following through with his betrothal promises.

While I initially asked, "Where's the love?" in today's Scripture readings and looked at them from this perspective, I saw that the love shines through in Joseph's actions. This is what Jesus asks of us, to let our love for God shine through in how we treat each other in all circumstances.

So, is love there even when we don't feel it? If God is there and God is love, then so is love.