

Sermon: Christmas Eve 2019 8:00 PM - "God's Love Language"
Ralph Connor Memorial United Church, Canmore AB – Rev Greg Wooley

Gary Chapman has written a book entitled "The 5 Love Languages: The secret to Love that Lasts." At last count, more than 12 million copies of this book have sold, so chances are pretty good that a few people in this room are familiar with it. While I have some significant differences of opinion with the author, I find his framework so helpful, to think of love as something given and received in a variety of ways – and this applies not only in our primary relationships, but in the way we interact with all people and, in fact, the world.

The five love languages described by Chapman are:

- Words of Affirmation
- Quality Time
- Receiving Gifts
- Acts of Service
- Physical Touch

I'm going to leave those five points up on screen for a moment. Which of these are things you do naturally? As a recipient, which of these do you look for as an expression of love and care? Which of these would you like to *be better at*, either in giving or receiving? And then one more question: how do these love languages shape your understanding of God's loving presence in your life, and in the life of the world?

Earlier this year I had the great gift of a three-month sabbatical, with the stated goal of developing a healthier work-life balance. Based on my work pattern since then, I'm not sure that I was very successful in building a healthier balance, but in all aspects of my sabbatical I learned a lot about God. And what I learned, is that God *doesn't* balance things: Whether we understand God in a personified way or more as a spiritual presence that enters and surrounds life, God is all about love, always and everywhere, offered unconditionally, unreservedly, passionately, personally and globally. God's love is present, directly and through supportive humans, in those times when we feel sad or excluded or isolated or diminished. God calls us to have a healthy life balance by having the same generosity of spirit toward ourselves that we are called to have for others, and by building 'sabbath time' into our lives... but the love of God for the world, is 24/7. We may not acknowledge that the Divine presence of Love is in our lives all the time, but there is no place and no life circumstance beyond the reach of love.

If we take the Christmas story in its fullness, this is the message it delivers: there is no place and no life circumstance beyond the reach of love. Mary, barely of child-bearing age and only *betrothed* to Joseph, is chosen not only to birth Jesus but to nurture, teach, love, and guide him. Joseph, very much aware that he's not the biological father, is nonetheless called to set aside his entitlement and give the child a home and a name. When it came time to share the news about Messiah's birth, it was shepherds, outcasts par excellence, who are invited to be the first witnesses and heralds. And since the good news is for all people, the Magi, seekers from another land, were summoned to honour this child who would usher in a new realm. As we hear each of these scenes, we see inclusive love reaching out to the margins, stepping beyond societal limitations and prohibitions in the name of something far more powerful.

All of this talk about the ever present power of love may sound contrary to our experience, especially in these days in which seeds of hatred, exclusion and division are sown so freely and publicized so endlessly, but part of the reason that divisiveness needs to be so loud is that it is so wrong-headed. The power of love is the power that gives life, and it needs people to sign on and say "yes, that's how I'm going to live my life". So in light of this, let's revisit those five love languages, and how we can express these gifts of God's grace through our lives:

Words of Affirmation

Who are the people I encounter, who don't get their personhood or abilities affirmed often enough? Who gets overlooked? Who gets put down, in their family or by virtue of their station in life, and needs a kind word or staunch advocate? Who gets silenced or ignored, and needs to find their own voice, and needs someone to encourage them as they do so? And on the flip side of that: do *I* really know that *my* life matters, *that God's love is for me, as I am*?

Quality Time

How we spend our time demonstrates what our *actual* values are. What gets top billing in my day? Are there people or issues that I care about and want to spend time with, but allow to be pushed out by lesser things? Do I honour those I'm in primary relationship with, with the gift of time? And is there time in my day or my week to breathe deep, slow down, and spend quality time with friends, family members, God?

Receiving Gifts

It's telling, that Gary Chapman's chapter heading is "receiving gifts" rather than "giving gifts." He does write about both giving and receiving, but learning how to graciously receive is such an important life skill. So... am I able to really receive a compliment? Am I able to acknowledge and honour what life brings, even if it isn't quite what I expected? Does the two-way flow of generosity have a place in my life – generously and lovingly offering my time, talent and treasure, and generously receiving a kind gesture, a step toward reconciliation, a nudge by God toward doing something greater with my life?

Acts of Service

God calls us to serve one another, and this can be expressed in many ways: some short-term, some long-term, sometimes person-to-person, sometimes organized and done as a group. So the big question here, is whether my actions live up to my intentions. Or perhaps my intentions need adjusting, so that "how can I help?" becomes a more important question than "what's in it for me?" One way or another, involvement with sustained, meaningful actions for the greater good of humanity, or defending the rights of wildlife, or getting fully involved in improving the health of the world, is where hope takes human form.

Physical Touch

When our children were growing up, there was a song by Charlotte Diamond that told us that "four hugs a day" was the minimum, not a maximum. Indeed, safe, loving human touch is essential, especially in circumstances where touch is in short supply. And beyond that, I hear in this love language an encouragement to embodiment: in the same way that the Christmas story speaks of Jesus as God becoming specifically incarnate or embodied, all of these love languages cause us to embody love. In all of these love languages, are there places where I need to get out of my head and into my body, let God live in me, and physically, tangibly turn that love into something that will benefit another?

Conclusion

The story of God's love for all humanity and indeed for all the earth, is a story that continues to unfold and has so many different entry points. Some of us are more comfortable with actions than words, others just the opposite. Some of us might find physical touch really difficult – and that needs respecting - but are super generous with our time or our finances. Nobody is expected to be adept at all these love languages, but we are challenged to be a bit more multilingual than we are at the moment: to expand the range of ways that we express our belief in God, by sharing God's great gift of love in our lives.

May this holy night, speak of the Divine love that reaches across all ages, beyond status and class distinction, beyond societal rules that tell us who should be on the inside and who should be on the outside, even beyond our human focus on income over ecosystems. May you find ways to join with others to build God's diverse gift of love into your life in extended, sustainable ways. May God's love, a gift that is both eternal and of this very moment, be real for you, and may love shape the year 2020 for you and all the world in new, healthy and varied ways. In Christ we pray, Amen.

References cited:

Chapman, Gary. *The Five Love Languages*. Chicago: Northfield, 1992/2010.

Diamond, Charlotte. "Four Hugs a Day" - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tWcWEVOVMsU>

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