

God is Love  
 Song of Songs 1:9-10, 15-17; 2:1-3, 8-14  
 Hebrews 13:1-8, 15-16  
 Heather Leslie Hammer  
 August 29, 2010

In the car on trips across the country, my parents used to teach us songs and sayings. Some of these we didn't get when we were very young, then we thought they were hilarious when we were a little older, but as we became teenagers, we just thought they were corny—and really bad. One saying went like this:

"Your eyes are like pools, cess pools.  
 Your nose is like a river, it runs.  
 Your ears are like flowers, cauliflowers.  
 Your teeth are like stars; they come out at night."

I found others on the Internet—

"Your lips are like petals, bicycle pedals."  
 "Your skin is so soft, like mould on an orange."

Here's one that's even biblical:

"Your hair is like the sea, the Dead Sea."

I was reminded of these phrases, when reading Song of Songs, love poetry of the Hebrew Bible. In this biblical poem, the King says to his bride:

"Your hair is like a flock of goats which descend from Gilead.  
 Your teeth are like a flock of young lambs, which have come up from the washing, all of which are paired, and not one among them is alone.  
 Your temples are like a slice of a pomegranate behind your veil" (6:5-7).

Then later the verses get even better:

"The curves of your thighs are like ornaments, the work of the hands of an artist.  
 Your navel is a rounded goblet never lacking mixed wine.  
 Your abdomen is a stack of wheat enclosed with lilies.  
 Your two breasts are like two fawns, twins of a gazelle.  
 Your neck is like a tower in Lebanon keeping watch over Damascus.  
 Your head crowns you as Carmel, and the flowing locks of your head are like purple threads.  
 This your stature is comparable to a palm tree, and your breasts to its clusters. I say, 'I will climb the palm tree; I will take hold of its fruit stalks;  
 Oh, may your breasts be like clusters of the vine and the fragrance of your breath like apples and your mouth like the best wine...' (7:2-6, 8-10, from S. Craig Glickman, *A Song for Lovers*, pp. 81-82).

And you thought the Bible was boring?

People used to say that Song of Solomon, or Song of Songs as it is also called, was all about the relationship between God and the people of Israel, or about Christ and Christ's church. But today the scholars are saying it is poetry about love, physical, sensual love between a man and a woman.

In Greek, there are four words for love. Song of Songs gives a poet's description of one kind of love, *eros*. *Eros* is "romantic love." We find the idea of romantic love only in the Old Testament, particularly in this book, The Song of Songs. The New Testament was written in Greek, but the word *eros* does not appear in the Christian books of the Bible.

We yearn for *eros* when we don't have it. We dream about it and write songs about it. And even when we are "in a relationship," as we say on Facebook, many are not always happily in love. Love takes cultivating. Some have said, the three hardest words in the world to get right are "I love you." In marriage, or intimate partnership, we need to express our love, not take it for granted. So many relationships fail—the Bible helps us see that God intends for us to be in romantic relationship.

The second word for love in Greek is *storge*, which translates into English as "affection." This is the love like the love between a parent and a child, unconditional love that comes very naturally. When a mother holds her infant, she can't help but carry it close, give it love pats, and kiss the top of its head. This kind of love comes as readily as when a mother cat nurses its young kittens. "Affection" is comfortable and uninhibited. C. S. Lewis has written about the four kinds of love and says of "affection": "It lives with humble un-dress, private things; soft slippers, old clothes, old jokes, the thump of a sleepy dog's tail on the kitchen floor, the sound of a sewing machine, a [ragdoll] left on the lawn" (*The Four Loves*, p. 34).

Everyone needs "affection." We need it when we are young, and we need it through the years. It's the feeling of a happy home, of being accepted just the way we are. Some didn't have a happy home growing up; and some live alone today and miss this easy feeling of being cared about unconditionally. We cultivate affection when we choose to spend time with those we love, when we establish family traditions and remember to carry them out. If you come from a family where there wasn't enough affection, you may want to be intentional about developing new patterns in your present relationships. Counselors can help families learn to communicate better and express love better.

These different kinds of love spill into each other, for instance, it's certainly nice when a relationship that has *eros* (romantic love) also has *storge* (affection).

The third kind of love in Greek is called *philia*. This is the love that is described in our passage from Hebrews today in the New Testament. In writing to the people of this early Christian community, the author talks about "mutual love." This kind of love is what we find in friendship. In most friendships, we choose one another. Friendship is voluntary and mutual. We may choose one another because of common interests, a common work place or neighborhood. But once we have chosen one another, we love each other simply because we are friends. We build a trust and a deep caring over time. The goal is to have this kind of mutual love in the Christian community. In the church we hope we have this kind of love, even though we don't personally choose one another. Anyone who comes to church becomes part of this love. Church may be the only place where by virtue of one's

simple choice to attend, one enters into friendship with a whole group of people. This inclusive feeling is what makes church unique among organizations. Paul and his friend Timothy are examples of friends in the Bible and leaders in the early church. In our church, we would hope to care for one another as they did.

The last kind of love is *agape*. We know this love as charity or kindness. This is sometimes called Christian love, a self-giving love that isn't usually reciprocated. This love is motivated by compassion. It imitates Christ. In Hebrews, the author says we should love the stranger and the prisoner. *Agape* love is the love that is made tangible in our offerings to God and for the human family, for we consider ourselves members of God's family. Even though we may not know the people of Pakistan or Haiti, or the unemployed in Rohnert Park...they are our brothers and sisters. We are called to have the compassionate heart of Christ.

Listen to our biblical rationale for *agape* love, from 1 John:

"We love because he first loved us. Those who say, 'I love God,' and hate their brothers or sisters, are liars; for those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen. The commandment we have from him is this: those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also" (1 John 4:19-21).

God commands us to love one another.

All four of these kinds of love can be hard to sustain, but this one, *agape*, I think, is the hardest to foster. We have moments of true *agape* love, but think of all the places in the world lacking in love! Think of wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, tensions in Gaza and the West Bank; think of what happened on 9/11 at Ground Zero and the demonstrations there now over the building of a mosque; think of the demonstrations around same-sex marriage; think of homophobia and racial prejudice. You remember the song that goes, "What the world needs now is love, sweet love. It's the only thing that there's just too little of" (words by Hal David).

*Eros, storge, philia, and agape*—all these kinds of love make life more fully human, more fully as God would have life be.

Some of you may have read the "The Mitford Years," books with Father Tim, the lovable Episcopal priest. In the latest book by Jan Karon, *Home to Holly Springs*, we go back to Father Tim's childhood. In the course of his reviewing his life, there are examples of each kind of love.

Father Tim falls in love with Cynthia Coppersmith, in a previous book in the series. Both are in their 60s, rather late in life for a first love. Father Tim can't believe he is in love, he denies it for a long time. But he is attracted passionately and he can't shake the hold she has on him. He is full of springtime and poetry and desire. It is *eros*, even though he thought he would always be a frumpy bachelor. She has captivated him! Shot with Cupid's arrow—He is love sick and then later so happy he allowed himself to indulge in marital bliss.

Before Father Tim marries, his life as a parish priest was lonely, visiting parishioners, preaching, attending to church conflicts, and coming home to an empty parsonage. But we see a very tender relationship between Father Tim and his dog, Barnabas. This is an example of "affection," or *storge*. Barnabas is always glad to see him and to go for a walk. The dog is at times unruly, but Father Tim discovers if he recites scripture, Barnabas settles right down. Later Father Tim recognizes the joy of affectionate love when he adopts Dooley, a child without parents. He looks forward to his time with Dooley and sees how much he was missing before he had a son. In fact, in this latest book, Father Tim recognizes the loneliness of his childhood. His parents weren't really available to him. He always thought his father didn't love him, but he never knew why. When he is mysteriously called back to his childhood home of Holly Springs, Father Tim reconnects with Peggy, the black woman who raised him. More than from his parents, from Peggy Tim received *storge*, an unconditional love and affection.

As a boy, Father Tim had one special chum, Tommy. Tim's father prohibited Tim from seeing Tommy because Tommy's father was "a drunk." But the boys snuck out and climbed an old water tower and cut each other's fingers to be "blood brothers" and defended each other and took the blame for each other. This kind of mutual love and loyalty is *philia*, the love we strive for in the church.

Finally, *agape*, the self-giving love, we see in Father Tim throughout his ministry—his humble ways and generous sharing of his time and resources. And at the end of *Home to Holly Springs*, Father Tim decides to give his stem cells for a bone-marrow transplant to the man he learns is his half-brother, a black man. Father Tim meets this man, a stranger, and when he discovers his blood is the right match, he wants to help. It is simply the right thing to do.

We are called to do the right thing. To give unselfishly to those who need us.

Because God loves us, we are to love each other. I think there is no better place to practice love than in the church. That's what we're here for.