

Article of Faith: Love
by Anna Pinckney Straight
Old Stone Presbyterian Church ~ Lewisburg, West Virginia
July 23, 2017

Mark 12: 28 – 34

²⁸One of the scribes came near and heard them disputing with one another, and seeing that he answered them well, he asked him, “Which commandment is the first of all?”

²⁹Jesus answered, “The first is, ‘Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one; ³⁰you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.’ ³¹The second is this, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ There is no other commandment greater than these.” ³²Then the scribe said to him, “You are right, Teacher; you have truly said that ‘he is one, and besides him there is no other’; ³³and ‘to love him with all the heart, and with all the understanding, and with all the strength,’ and ‘to love one’s neighbor as oneself,’— this is much more important than all whole burnt offerings and sacrifices.” ³⁴When Jesus saw that he answered wisely, he said to him, “You are not far from the kingdom of God.” After that no one dared to ask him any question.

Love.

“Love is what makes the world go ‘round”

Words from the 1960s musical *Carnival*.¹

“All You Need is Love.”

The Beatles.²

“And love is love, cannot be killed or swept aside.”³

Lin Manuel Miranda.

Each of these saying have their own truth.

¹ <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Carnival!>

² https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/All_You_Need_Is_Love

³ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6jehrbUGdIE>

Lin-Manuel Miranda’s Tony Acceptance Speech for Best Original Score

My wife’s the reason anything gets done,
She nudges me towards promise by degrees.
She is a perfect symphony of one,
Our son is her most beautiful reprise.

We chase the melodies that seem to find us,
Until their finished songs then start to play.
When senseless acts of tragedy remind us
That nothing here is promised—not one day.

The show is proof that history that remembers,
We live through times when hate and fear seem stronger.
We rise and fall and light from dying embers,
Remembrances that hope and love last longer.

And love is love
Cannot be killed or swept aside.
I sing Vanessa’s symphony; Eliza tells her story.
Now fill the world with music, love, and pride.

When we turn to the Bible, however, we find that love both includes and goes beyond those words. It is deeper, and broader, both more challenging and more hopeful.

The love of God who gives his people, wandering in the wilderness, commandments to help them live in their new, no-longer-slave-world, not once, but twice. Jesus describes a love that not only includes neighbors it includes enemies and self and God about all of that, before everything.

Love that has traction and grit and stick-to-it-iveness.

Janice Stamper, a pastoral colleague who is caring for her aging father in rural Kentucky in a home that is being devoured by termites without the resources to move or quickly take care of the problem, wrote this on facebook the other day:⁴

I get so weary of well-meaning folks telling me I can just spray for termites, do cement work, repair walls, deal with the water, remove the junk, etc. This is in addition to all the mowing, garden work, house work and caring for Dad. And now it looks like Dad may need some kind of a ramp before too long to get in and out of the house. All that needs to be done is so overwhelming. Sometimes I just want God with skin on to show up and help.

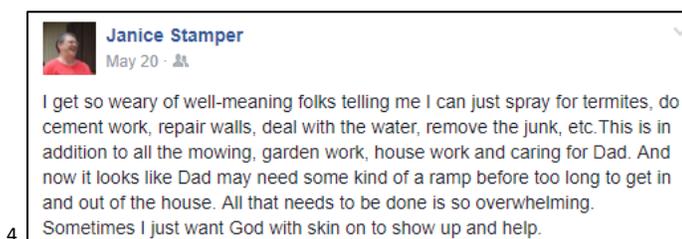
God with skin on. That's the kind of love that the Bible prescribes. Describes. Ascribes to truly being of God.

And so, what is love?

Love can be ruining the surprise⁵

An invitation arrived in our mailbox. My name was on it, and so was my twin sister's. We were ten years old, and our friend Alice was about to be ten, too. "Shhh!" the invitation read. "It's a Surprise Party!"

What's a surprise party? we wondered. Our mother explained. It was a secret. We were not to breathe a word about it to anyone—especially Alice. When we arrived at the party, Alice would not be there. We and the other guests would hide in the living room and await her return. When Alice arrived, we would jump out and yell, "Surprise!" Then the party would begin. It sounded fun....



⁴ Dianne Morrison, East Grand Rapids, Michigan

<https://www.christiancentury.org/article/surprise-essays-readers>

Retrieved June 13, 2017.

It was a Saturday afternoon, but my sister and I dressed in our Sunday clothes—matching dresses, white anklets, and patent leather shoes. Our mother combed our hair and adjusted our hairbands. Then she drove us to Alice’s house.

We walked to the front door, carrying our gifts. We rang the doorbell—and Alice came to the door. “Surprise?” we said with hesitation.

“What are you doing here?” Alice asked.

Within seconds our mother and Alice’s mother joined us at the front door.

“You’re early,” Alice’s mother said. “The party is tomorrow.”

Our mother began to apologize but was interrupted by Alice’s mother. I was expecting a reprimand. Instead she said,

“Well, come on in,” looking right at me. “I’ve been expecting you, just not quite this early. And don’t worry. I was going to tell Alice anyway.”

We stepped inside, and while our mothers made small talk over coffee, my sister and I played with Alice.

The following afternoon, we once again donned our Sunday finery and arrived at Alice’s house. The party was underway. Alice was all smiles, and so was her mother.

This happened....55 years ago, yet still fresh in my memory is the unmerited kindness Alice’s mother showed the three bewildered people on her doorstep... I see the humor; I feel the embarrassment. But most of all I sense the invitation of God, who is always expecting me.

Romans 12:10

Love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor.

Love can be accepting imperfection in those you love.

Rocky Supinger, Associate Pastor at the Claremont Presbyterian Church, posted this on his blog last week:⁶

My daughter’s bestie when on vacation to Chicago and sent a postcard. It said, “I am in a big city you are great.” It arrived as I was on my way to collect Daughter from dance class, and I retrieved it from the mailbox along with the new issue of Harper’s and then slipped in inside the magazine’s pages.

We had returned home by the time I remembered it. “Oh, Bestie sent you a postcard!” I announced and strode across the room to retrieve it. But it wasn’t there. While Daughter stared blankly at me, I flipped through the magazine, held it by its spine and shook it, but nothing was in there. It had fallen out. I lost Daughter’s postcard from her best friend. [hashtag] #dadfail.

I swallowed hard and admitted that I had lost it. I apologized. I told her what the postcard said. She smiled and said, “That’s okay.” [hashtag] #daughterwin.

Genesis 37:3

Now Israel loved Joseph more than any other of his children, because he was the son of his old age; and he had made him a long robe with sleeves.

⁶ <http://yorocko.com/2015/07/20/i-blew-it-daughter-stood-tall-and-it-all-worked-out-in-the-end/> Retrieved July 22, 2015.

Love can be moving to a place you never wanted to live.

Four months after Lenore DePree married her husband, Gordon, he went off to Korea for two years. Two years apart, connected only by letters and a few photos. When he returned home, Lenore was certain that, now, their life together could begin. Her dream of “a nice little house on a quiet street.... babies, kids who grew up to have bikes and roller skates—a peaceful American life.” Instead, within a week of his return, he told his wife he had been offered a job in ministry that would take the two of them back to Korea.

Lenore, in the book about their life together, wrote:⁷

I could see it. The little house on a peaceful street, the bikes parked in the driveway, the neighborhood school for the kids to go to, a normal American life—the life I had dreamed of living with him—it was sliding away.

“How would you feel about it?” he was asking.

I looked at him, standing there tall and powerful. I took in a long breath, trying to show how brave I was, and suddenly felt like I was going to throw up. [was I willing to go to Korea with him?]⁸

He was still standing there, waiting for my answer. What if I said no? What if I refused to do something obviously important to him? Would it somehow harm us....?

Somewhere, in the middle of that warm and powerful night, I knew I would go wherever he went, and the little dream house on a quiet street could wait. Someday....

Lenore DePree’s someday wouldn’t come until almost 50 years later, 4 children, 3 continents, and 48 houses later. It wasn’t the life she had planned, but it **was** lived with the person she loved as he followed his calling to teach and to serve. His calling becoming her calling.

Ruth 1: 15 – 16

So she said, “See, your sister-in-law has gone back to her people and to her gods; return after your sister-in-law.”¹⁶ But Ruth said, “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.”

Love can be knowing what love can’t fix

Presbyterian Pastor Matt Gaventa wrote these words about his father and his father’s diagnosis and battle with serious chemical, life-altering depression:⁹

Mom and I didn’t know how to talk about it. We didn’t know what to say to him, so we just said we loved him. I told him I loved him because I loved him, and because I thought no one so well loved could be sad. And I said it because I knew Paul’s words: “Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.” If we loved him enough, surely he’d come home....

[But...] At a chemical level, it didn’t matter that we loved him. We couldn’t say

⁷ Lenore DePree, *47 Houses on the Long Journey Home*, Dog Ear Publishing, LLC (August 12, 2013).

⁸ Original Text: “Korea. I had thought of Korea as hell. Was I willing to go to hell with him?”

⁹ <http://www.christiancentury.org/article/2015-01/what-love-can-t-fix?print> Retrieved February 7, 2015.

it in a way that could penetrate the shield that depression had erected around his sense of self-worth.

On those dark nights, the words of grace to me have been these: love can't do everything. It isn't your fault; there's nothing you could have said or done. Having depression doesn't mean you're not loved. It just means you can't hold that love in your heart. So trying to cure depression with love is like bailing out a boat with a sieve: well intended, but not that helpful.

...when brain chemistry runs us down, love stays on its feet....when sin and death run out of steam, when guilt and shame have no more worlds to conquer, when all those dark nights converge onto the sunrise—on that day, love will still be standing, thanks to the God who loved us from the beginning.

To me, that's the gospel: God's love won't fix everything, but it can outlast anything. It's the only way I ever got through.

Romans 12: 15 “Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep.”

Love can be using only what you need

“Richard Semmler¹⁰ is a mathematician, now in his 60s, who teaches calculus and algebra at Northern Virginia Community College. He can explain how to find the derivative of a polynomial... [and all sorts of complicated equations]. But in his private life, Semmler has reduced his existence to the simplest equation. In the last 35 years, by working part-time jobs and forgoing such everyday comforts as a home telephone and vacations, by living in an efficiency apartment and driving an old car, Semmler has donated as much as half of his annual income or more to charity. His goal: \$1 million before he retires.

In 2005 he spoke to a reporter and said, ‘If I didn't do all of the things I was doing, I would probably have [lots of things. Lots of new things]’ Semmler said.... as he took a break from pounding nails on a Habitat for Humanity house in Vienna. He donated \$100,000 to this house, most of the money required to build it. [And as he looked at the house], his T-shirt streaked with sweat and sawdust [he said]. ‘But I would not do it that way,’ he said. ‘I want to do it this way.’

Percentage-wise, Semmler's generosity is exceedingly rare among the middle-class -- or the rich, for that matter, say those who study philanthropy. Each year, U.S. households give away an average of 2 percent of their income to nonprofit and religious organizations, according to Giving USA, which tracks donation trends. A household with Semmler's annual income, \$100,000, donates an average of \$2,000 annually to charity.

In 2004, Semmler gave away \$60,000. ‘Life isn't always about multiplying what you get, he explained. Sometimes, it's about subtraction.’”

¹⁰ Jacqueline L. Salmon. “The Washington Post.” *Professor Finds Fulfillment in Emptying His Pockets*. Saturday, June 11, 2005. <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2005/06/10/AR2005061001843.html>

1 Peter 4:10

Like good stewards of the manifold grace of God, serve one another with whatever gift each of you has received.

Matthew 22:39b

You shall love your neighbor as yourself.

Sisters and Brothers in Christ, love is many things.

And many of them can be different from what the world tells us to expect.

It can be letting go, being open, finding honesty, and searching for grace in places where you aren't sure where to find it.

It can be ruining the surprise, moving to a place you didn't want to live, accepting imperfections, and governing your life by the rule of subtraction rather than multiplication.

And it's learning to see and live and act that seeks to glorify God in all that you say and think and do.

For, to end where this begins,

love, true love

comes from a power that pre-exists creation

and will persevere beyond anything we can create.

It is nothing less than the power of God.

1 John 5:7

Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God;

John 3:16-17

For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.

Amen.