

Ash Wednesday
Church of the Good Shepherd, Silver City, NM

February 18, 2015
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The Law of Love

A couple is involved in a very, very typical argument. "What do you mean, you love me?" "You never pay attention to me." "You come home from work tired, you sit down beside me in front of the TV, and you never reach over to touch me."

"What do you mean, you don't know I love you?" comes the reply. "I mowed the lawn over the weekend. I keep the cars in good shape. I fix things for you. I get you water when you ask for it without complaining—and you don't even notice!"

There was a book published in 1992 that has been so successful it has gone through four other printings. The concepts are now the core ideas behind a website and training events. It is called The Five Love Languages. The author, Gary Chapman claims that we have essentially five ways we understand love in action.

- Gifts
- Time
- Touch
- Words
- Acts of service.

And each of us has a primary and a secondary love language.

Now the kicker is that we tend to expect to be loved in the ways we were loved. As we grew up if we were given gifts as acts of love, we will tend to expect gifts as acts of love. We will tend to give gifts as acts of love. All would be well if we lived with people like us, but invariably we will get someone whose love languages are different. We get caught in expressing love as WE would express it and not as our loved one needs it to be expressed.

The act of true loving is to set aside one's own patterns to meet the needs of another. This is what God did in the Incarnation, in sending Jesus as His Son to be with us. This is what Jesus did on the Cross, giving himself for us. This is the nature of God's unconditional love.

This is the law of love.

We tend to think of laws as checklists. If we check off all the boxes we're OK. Do this and don't do that, and you'll be OK. Don't do this and do that and you've got trouble. A

power greater than you will make life miserable if you don't follow the rules. If you do, that power will essentially leave you alone to do your own thing. But the Law of God is the law of love. Even in the Old Testament this is true. The 10 commandments are meant not just to govern a person's behavior, but to form a certain kind of person, one who is respectful of God, attentive and respectful of others, and willing to give of oneself for another.

The Law of Love comes into its own, however, in Christ. Jesus tells Nicodemus, "For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life, For God did not send his son into the world to condemn the world, but that through him the world might be saved." (John 3:16-17) Jesus says in John 13:34, "A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another."

It isn't really a new commandment, it is the core of all the commandments. In the summary of the Law that Jesus gives the Pharisees he says what?

Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength, and love your neighbor as yourself.

It is only new in that it presents something we have too often forgotten. Augustine of Hippo's Homily 7 on First John 4 is titled, "Love, and Do as You Will." He writes,

All who do not love God are strangers and antichrists. They might come to the churches, but they cannot be numbered among the children of God. ...To have all these sacraments is, as I say, possible even for a bad person. But to have love and be a bad person is impossible. Love is the unique gift, the fountain that is yours alone. The Spirit of God exhorts you to drink from it, and in so doing to drink from himself.

The idea is that if you love you participate in God's very nature, and you do good. Love is the true fulfillment of the law.

The law of love is much harder than keeping rules. Keeping rules means that we focus on our own behavior. It's all rather self-focused and self-directed. One need not concern oneself with another. Pride too quickly takes control and says, "See how good a person I am?" But loving means focusing on the other person. It means, like the love languages, to hear what the other person's world is like and to enter it, and to speak love to them as they hear, and not as we would speak. Love focuses on the other, giving pride no foothold in our hearts.

Where do we learn about the law of love? In the story of Jesus Christ, and in the impact that story has had throughout the ages. This is why this Lent we are listening to the New Testament. In it you will find described, illustrated and exemplified the law of love.

Listen then, to the story of the greatest Love that ever the world knew, and celebrate a holy Lent.