

Wednesday July 10, 2013

Different kinds of love

By Jim Taylor

The Greeks had a word for it – “it” being almost anything.

And if they didn’t have a word for it, Greek words have enabled subsequent civilizations to fabricate a word for almost anything. For example, triskaidekaphobia, which, if you break it down to its roots, refers to fear of the number 13. But simply being able to name things doesn’t mean the Greeks were always right.

I’ve spent most of my life taking for granted the Greek definitions of love:

- Agape: compassion, altruism, unselfish caring
- Éros: passionate, sensual, erotic love, lust
- Philia: friendship, loyalty, the affection between brothers and sisters
- Storgē: parental love for a child, self-sacrificing love for a less fortunate person.

Those are valuable distinctions. Teachers of the Christian faith often resort to the Greek definitions to make clear that Jesus’ love for sinners, lepers, and small children was agape, not eros.

The Dalai Lama argues, winsomely, that altruism is the most desirable human emotion.

But recently, I’ve found myself thinking that the Greek distinctions aren’t perfect. They assume, for example, that all brothers and sisters share similar feelings for each other. And that just ain’t so. Especially if there’s a legacy involved.

I’m not even sure that Jesus’ love always took the agape form.

I want you

At this stage in my life, I’d define three categories, not four.

There is, first, the love that says, “I love you because you can do something for me.”

Think of young children, reliant on their parents. Or of the hormonal teenager, seeking sexual satisfaction. I want your body, your ability to play the piano, your skill with words, your bubbly personality...

This kind of love expects – no, demands – that love be reciprocated.

You need me

Second, there’s the love that says, “I love you because I can do something for you.” That might well be parental love – helping children grow healthy in body and spirit. It might also be felt by social workers dealing homeless street people. And by teachers or mentors.

It could also bleed into something close to pity: I can introduce you to ideas, places, experiences that you have never had before.

This kind of love expects the recipient to change, to grow.

As is

And third, there’s the kind of love that simply says, “I love you because of what you are.”

It doesn’t expect to change the other person. It doesn’t expect anything in return. It just values the other for what she or he is already. He/she comes as is.

I don't mean hero-worship. I don't mean a distant adulation for a figurehead who may have made the world a better place, or for an out-of-reach film star. Love has to be personal. You're well aware of someone's faults, weaknesses, and shortcomings. But you love'em anyway. For who they are.

I think of it as the highest level of love.

It's tempting to assume that this third kind of love corresponds to what the Christian church calls God's unconditional love, embodied in Jesus.

But Jesus' love was not always unconditional. "Go and sin no more," he said. Clearly, he expected something in response. And I'm pretty sure he felt he could do something to change the lives of those he called to follow him.

Perhaps all three kinds of love weave together -- sometimes with one thread dominant, sometimes another.

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YOUR TURN

The concept of looking at Bible stories through the eyes of an underlooked character appealed to Charles Hill: "I've never considered that approach to Bible stories. Thanks for the suggestion."

Isabel Gibson commented, "Ah, yes -- taking a technique from one area (in this case, biblical criticism) and applying it in another (music appreciation). The older I get, the more I see value in this cross-cutting approach -- it gives us new eyes (and ears!)".

George Brigham wrote that he had been using the technique: "I've been doing this kind of thing for about 15 years as 'alternative' Bible readings. I think I got the idea from John Bell of the Iona Community, in Scotland."

George attached two examples, one from John Bell, "told from Mary's perspective," George wrote, "best read by an older woman with a Scots accent, and one of mine (told from a tax-payers perspective)." Unfortunately, length prohibits reprinting them here.

Tom Watson commented, "Your column about listening to other parts, either in music or stories, was right on target. I wonder what the scene of the Hebrews crossing the sea to get out of Egypt looked and felt like to those hapless Egyptians whose chariots were being swamped? As one of my granddaughters not long ago declared, 'That was cruel of God to treat those guys like that.'"

"In terms of music, my friend Gil and I have an ongoing discussion about which is more important: the melody or the words. Gil, a seasoned and expert saxophonist, claims that words are at best secondary, and generally unnecessary. In return I ask how he identifies a song if it isn't by the words. He points to many pieces of music, classical especially, that have no lyrics. And I suppose that even with no words at all Dave Brubeck's 'Take Five' would still be wonderful.

"It's an argument with no ready solution. But it does lead me to muse about whether or not people love singing some of the old hymns because of their tune or the words. Must surely be the tune because if they stopped to listen to the theology behind the words they'd likely never sing again. Or just quit coming to church. Hmmm..."

Ivan Gamble raised the musical ante with his insights: "I come from a musical and religious family... the boys sang four-part harmony in Gospel Music. My second name is 'Sankey', as I was named after Dwight L. Moody's Song Leader. We often sang in harmony as we milked the cows. I even enjoy hearing chickadees and mourning doves singing in minor 3rds, although I don't know why the chickadees song is a happy one, 'Sweet weather', while that of the mourning dove is a sad one, 'I'm so lonely'."

Ivan's reading is more eclectic than mine. He added, "I once read a very interesting article by Isaac Asimov on the diatonic scale."

Nancy Kerr resonated with Ted Spenser's comments about some of the less loveable elements of the church, in last week's letters: "I wonder if Ted is also a Preacher's Kid, because I recognized what he says as one perspective of PKs.

"When I was a child, church people didn't seem to be aware I could hear. I heard a lot of complaints of the pastor, my father. When I was a teenager, our youth was the focus of complaints from the Ladies Society who didn't like our using the kitchen. I'd quote apt Bible verses to myself as a response I didn't dare make because I was the preacher's kid.

"As an adult, after seminary and a second church, I had a revelation: the church is God's congregation but still in the world and of course it will reflect the world's people. Thus the church is different because as its people we are to love each other. I've been practicing ever since."

And finally, a very personal response to last week's paraphrase of Psalm 30, from Stephanie Keer in Calgary: "I read your psalm paraphrase with huge empathy. As you know, I recently had a cancer scare and the day after surgery, decided the best four words in the world were 'You don't have cancer.' My cousin wasn't so lucky. She had a lump in her breast removed and was told it was cancer, the same day she learned her father, who lived three hours away, was dying. After his death, and the funeral, and making arrangements for the welfare of her 93-year-old disabled mother, she finally was able to see the specialist who will be overseeing her treatments. Because of her father's death, she missed the 'window,' and instead of 5 days of radiation, she is facing 15. Three gruelling weeks. She went to church this weekend for the first time since her father died, confessing anger with God. Fist-waving, floor-stomping, wastebasket-kicking angry. I told her what I tell myself: God is big enough to take it. No matter how I try, I can't even dent his relationship with me although I can mess up my relationship with him.

"In the last couple of weeks, I have watched the flooding in Alberta less objectively than usual for a journalist because I have friends from High River. More recently, I learned of the death of a former colleague and his wife, a double murder. It's ghastly, grisly, far too complicated for this e-mail, but I wonder if any of these people, including my cousin, will ever be able to compose their own psalm of praise. It seems almost facetious to pray that they, too, will [be able to] shout 'Glory, hallelujah'."

PSALM PARAPHRASES

The NRSV calls Psalm 82 "A plea for justice." It's nice to think of a loving God. But love does not render God toothless.

God sits at the head of the boardroom table.
"How long," God demands, "will you keep making the wrong choices?
How long will your policies favor injustice?
I expect you to be fair to everyone, including those who have no economic weight;
To defend the rights of those who have no voice, and no one to speak for them;
To protect the weak and the struggling from exploitation.
Of all people, they need your protection most.
They do not have education, or money, or friends in high places.
They have suffered devastating losses in their lives."

God says: "You think you have taken over my responsibilities.

But you are not God. When your time comes,
you will die, like everyone else.”

Come, Lord.
Come judge the earth.
We are yours to judge.

For this and other paraphrases, you can order my book *Everyday Psalms* from Wood Lake Publications,
info@woodlake.com or 1-800-663-2775 in Canada.

YOU SCRATCH MY BACK...

If you know someone else who might like to receive this column regularly via e-mail, send a request to jimt@quixotic.ca. Or, if you wish, forward them a copy of this column. But please put your name on it, so they don't think I'm sending out spam.

For other web links worth pursuing, try

- Ralph Milton's HymnSight webpage, <http://www.hymnsight.ca>, with a vast gallery of photos you can use to enhance the appearance of the visual images you project for liturgical use (prayers, responses, hymn verses, etc.)
- David Keating's "SeemslkeGod" page, www.seemslkegod.org;
- Isobel Gibson's thoughtful and well-written blog, www.traditionaliconoclast.com
- Alan Reynold's weekly musings, punningly titled "Reynolds Rap," write reynoldsrap@shaw.ca
- Wayne Irwin's "Churchweb Canada," an inexpensive service for any congregation wanting to develop a web presence, with free consultation. <http://www.churchwebcanada.ca>
- Alva Wood's satiric stories about incompetent bureaucrats and prejudiced attitudes in a small town are not particularly religious, but they are fun; write alvawood@gmail.com to get onto her mailing list.

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I write a second column each Sunday called Sharp Edges, which tends to be somewhat more cutting about social and justice issues. To sign up for Sharp Edges, write to me directly, at jimt@quixotic.ca, or send a note to sharpedges-subscribe@quixotic.ca
