

5 Easter Year C: 28 April 2013

Probably no one needs an introduction to the comic strip Garfield, but just in case: it's the running story of a slightly nerdy man, John Arbuckle, and his smart-aleck fat cat, Garfield.

Recently, after years of dating disaster, John's affections have been returned by an attractive veterinarian and the strip has turned to following their romance.

What I'm going to describe is a great example.

In the first panel, John is gazing dreamily into space and says to Garfield, "Isn't love great?"

Then in the next panel he says "I love love."

The third panel shows John alone.

Realizing this, he looks around and asks, "Where are you going?"

The dialogue bubble of Garfield's response in the last panel reads: "Outside. This hairball is gonna be a big one."

Now, Garfield is a bit of a cynic, but probably many of us can sympathize. Being around lovers in the first throes of infatuation is often uncomfortably cloying; we older, more experienced couples may look on with nostalgic longing, but we also are prone to say, "Just wait."

Love. Of all the nine fruits of the Spirit this one gets the most press. Across the ages, poets, artists, composers, philosophers, cartoonists have all treated the subject in great depth and in all its guises: erotic passion, innocent affection, stormy heartbreak, companionable age. But all of these popular expressions run far afield from the biblical word and meaning.

So what does Jesus mean when he commands us to love one another as he has loved us? And what does Paul mean in Galatians when he makes love the first of the fruits of the Spirit, those qualities that offer proof that we are in Christ and Christ in us? If you look at the dictionary listings for love, we might start coming close to a biblical understanding if we combine two of the definitions of love as a verb:
1: to have a deep, tender, ineffable feeling of affection and solicitude toward a person;
and 2: to have charity for.
I'll come back to this.

What the Bible does *not* mean is the kind of thing John Arbuckle was experiencing and that poets sing about: that elated, "high" feeling we get when we "*fall* in love." This kind of love is something that lasts typically less than a year and, unless replaced by true love, usually results in broken relationships.

So what *does* the Bible mean?

First consider the Hebrew.

This word "love," which we throw about so freely in English, has a special meaning in Hebrew.

Love in Hebrew is *ahava*, a word made up of three basic Hebrew letters.

These three letters are further broken down into two parts:

a two letter base or root meaning "to give" and a modifier.

So the meaning of *ahava* is "I give" and also "love".

I'm sure you can see the relationship between the two parts, "I give" and "love".

Love is giving. Not only is love giving, but the actual process of giving

develops the very connection between the giver and the receiver.

The more giving that one does, the greater is the connection.

Here then is our meaning number 1: a deep, tender, feeling of affection and solicitude that is so great as to be ineffable, which means to be beyond words, overwhelming.

This is God's love for us, God's desire for our lives:

a connection that is beyond words, a gift that is overwhelming.

Before I offer the next piece of this word study

please remember that we are looking at a verb:

love as an action, not merely a feeling or a state of being

but something that is lived out, practiced.

Which leads us to the Greek word for "love" and to meaning number 2: to have charity for.

In the Greek scriptures, the word most commonly translated as "love" is *agape*, which is rendered *caritas* in Latin, which in turn comes into English as "charity."

Again our English usage tends to muddy up the biblical intention:

caritas has nothing to do with almsgiving and everything to do with sacrificial living.

Agape love is unlimited loving-kindness towards all others

(and in our modern age I would add toward all creation as well);

it is held to be the ultimate perfection of the human spirit,

because it is said to both glorify and reflect the nature of God,

who, Scripture tells us, *is* love and the source of love.

The love that is *agape* is distinguished by its origin,

being Divinely infused into the soul,

and by its residing in the *will* rather than the emotions,

regardless of what emotions it stirs up.

Where the two meanings come together

is that each implies that true love is *given away*,

not something retained for oneself.

As that great songwriter/singer Reba McIntire puts it:

Smile's not a smile until it wrinkles your face

Bell's not a bell without ringing

A home's not a home when there's nobody there

A song's not a song without singing

Love isn't love till you give it away
Love isn't love till it's free
The love in your heart
Wasn't put there to stay
Oh love isn't love till you give it away

You might think love is a treasure to keep
Feeling to cherish and hold
But love is a treasure for people to share
You keep it by letting it go
Cause love can't survive
When it's hidden inside
And love was meant to be shared

Love isn't love till you give it away
Love isn't love till it's free
The love in your heart
Wasn't put there to stay
Oh love isn't love till you give it away

Paul describes *agape* love in his infamously over-quoted letter to the Corinthians: it is patient, kind, truthful, unselfish, trusting, believing, hopeful, and enduring. It is not jealous, boastful, arrogant, rude, selfish, or angry. True love never fails.

I have never met any person who fulfills this biblical definition of love perfectly, although I know some who come close. Which leads me to another point where the Hebrew and Greek agree on the meaning of love: while this description perfectly fits God's love toward us, and God's love displayed in Jesus, and it should be the way we love each other and God, we cannot accomplish it on our own. This kind of love is something to which we aspire, something toward which God draws us, something for which the Spirit prepares us, but it does not appear in us unaided. Left to our own devices it just doesn't seem to be in our nature.

But it *is* God's nature, and we are created in the image and likeness of God, which means that it is not an *impossible* aspiration. When we allow the Spirit to work in us, God's peace, God's joy, God's goodness, God's love— all the fruits of the Spirit that God longs to see thrive in us— start to be transmitted up from where they already live inside our hearts into our personality.

It all starts with love, *ahava, agape*,
life that is given away to gain greater depths of connection with another,
life that is unlimited loving-kindness toward all creation
in imperfect reflection of God's perfect self-giving.
God wants us all to be lovers, my friends, no doubt about it.
Jesus says that this is how the world will know that we are truly following him.
Paul says this is the only gift that really has any meaning in the end.
When we take the time to study our Bible,
this is one of the main messages to come through loud and clear.
We are put here to love: to love God, to love ourselves, to love one another
and to even go so far as to love those two misguided boys in Boston.

God so loved the world...how can we do any less?
Our task is to open our hearts to God,
giving ourselves to the power of Spirit,
committing ourselves to the way of Jesus,
so that everything we do will be done for God *in* love and *with* love,
so that we learn how to walk with God's love operating in our lives.
There is no other way to live worth living.