

First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham  
Working Together  
The Rev. Dr. John Judson  
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Isaiah 58:1-8  
Romans 12:1-8

What is your love language? This is a question that I ask every couple in premarital counseling. I ask because I believe knowing your partner's love language is a key ingredient in making for a lasting relationship. For those of you who don't know what love languages are, they are the ways in which we receive love; actions that make us feel loved. The idea of the love languages came out of a bestselling book called, The Five Love Languages by Gary Chapman. In the book, Chapman lists five ways in which people give and receive love. These are: **quality time** - you hang out and actually listen to one another; **words of affirmation** - you complement one another; **gifts** - you give things to each other; **acts of service** - you do things for one another; and **physical touch** - which includes everything from holding hands...to, well I will let you use your imagination. The theory is that if each partner learns the love language of the other and then puts those languages into practice, then the relationship will be better. With that in mind, my question this morning is, what is God's love language?

I realize that asking about God's love language may appear to be a strange question. It is a strange question because even though we speak of God loving the world, or of us loving God with all of our heart, soul, mind and strength, many of us might not be accustomed to thinking of how our loving God makes God feel. I say this because western Christianity has often wanted to speak of God as the unmoved mover, or as the one who doesn't need anything from us human beings. That, perhaps even to speak of God feeling loved, is to anthropomorphize God. Yet, if we listen to both of our texts this morning we will discover that God does have at least one, and perhaps more love languages. I say this because of a single word that occurs in both our texts. The word is translated as "acceptable." I have to admit for years when I read the word, acceptable, I heard echoes of my teachers, when they returned a paper, looking at me and saying with a sigh, "John you can do better, but this is acceptable." Implying that my effort was only good. However, both the Greek and Hebrew words translated as "acceptable", carry a different and more often used meaning, which is "well pleasing", meaning to warm the heart of another. We see this word in Isaiah 58:5 and Romans 12:1-2. In each case the writer is trying to tell those reading the text what makes God's heart glad. In Isaiah, God's heart is warmed by loosing the chains of injustice, untying the cords of the yoke, setting the oppressed free, sharing your food with the hungry, providing the poor wanderer with shelter, and clothing the naked. This is easily understood, so the question before us, is what about Paul? What does Paul have to tell us in this, his letter to the church in Rome?

The answer to this question is two-fold. The first answer Paul gives us is that what makes God feel loved, that warms God's heart, is when we "present our bodies as living sacrifices" to God. Paul says this action is our spiritual worship. For those reading Paul in the first century, this image of a sacrifice would be both familiar and easily understood. A sacrifice was an object left at the Temple of your particular deity. A sacrifice was something given, completely and unconditionally to God. For Paul, what pleases God is the giving of our whole selves over to God. We hold nothing back. We give our heart, soul, mind and body. We give over our actions and reactions. And when we give ourselves completely to God, it pleases God, because it means we are giving ourselves over to the deep and abundant life that God desires us to have. Like a parent who feels a sense of joy when their child embraces a life filled with meaning, purpose and joy, God does the same with us. But this is only half of the answer.

The second half of the answer comes, appropriately enough, in the second half of this section of Paul's letter. The second half of the answer to the question, what is God's love language, is the act of each of us playing our part in showing forth Jesus to the world. Let me explain. One of Paul's favorite images of the church is that it is the body of

Christ. We see this in verse four, "...so we who are many, are one body in Christ..." I would argue that when Paul speaks of the community of Jesus followers as the body of Christ, he is using this image as more than a metaphor; he actually means that we are the body of Christ in the world. We are the current incarnation of Jesus in the physical world. We re-present Jesus to the world around us. Therefore, we are to show forth Jesus to the world around us. The problem is that none of us can show forth Jesus alone. None of us have all the gifts and attributes of Jesus. Only by working together then, can we show forth Jesus. Only by assessing, or as Paul puts it, "...thinking with sober judgment..." about ourselves, and discovering how we are gifted to show forth part of Jesus can we be the body of Christ in the world.

I realize that in this time of Covid-19, it is not easy to see ourselves as the body of Christ. When we cannot be in the same space with one another; when we only see each other on video screens; when we cannot share a coffee pot and goodies after church, it is difficult to think of ourselves as a single body. Even so, I believe that this is the perfect time for us to understand what it means to live God's love language. I say this because all the gifts mentioned in this section; the gifts that we are to use to show forth Jesus to the world, are gifts that can, and should be used, outside of the church building. In other words, while Paul's offers gifts lists in other letters, those gifts are intended to help build the community internally. I believe that these gifts are those that are intended to be used, as I have said, to show forth Jesus to the world. And what better time to do this than in this moment when people are angry, bewildered, divided and discouraged. To understand this, I am going to take us on a quick tour of the gifts...and as I do, see if any of these might be one of your gifts.

Prophecy – prophecy is the gift of being able to speak the truth about God's loving justice as Isaiah did. It is to speak up for the poor, the hungry and the marginalized. Where can you speak up?

Ministry – this means serving. The Greek word is diaconos, from which we get our word deacon. It means to serve those who are in need. How can you help another?

Teacher – this means to help people understand the love and grace of God. Though we often associate this with clergy, it is what parents and friends can do with those with whom they spend time. With whom can you share God's love?

Exhorter – this means to encourage others. And if there is ever a time when people need encouragement it is now. Who can you encourage?

Giving – this means to give of our financial resources. Where are the needs in this moment greatest where you can share your money?

Leading – this is helping to guide people along the path to life. Where can you take the lead in helping others find their way?

Compassionate – this is showing compassion to those you encounter. Where can you show compassion in this often uncompassionate world?

Each of these gifts are attributes of Jesus. Each of these gifts are needed to show forth Jesus to the world. And only when we work together, each doing our part can we as a community show forth Jesus to the world. Only when we work together can we speak God's love language. My challenge for you then is this, to ask yourselves, what is my gift, how am I putting it to work to warm the heart of God and the heart of those around me?