

EASTER 6

Year B

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Love. Love in all its facets, colors, challenges, joys, and sorrows pervades human existence and is an element of our cultural productions in print, music, and cinema. The aspects of love and human affection are central to much of the fields of philosophy, sociology, psychology, and many more.

Theologian and scientist Weissenbacher¹ observes in his comparison of humans to artificial intelligence, presumably machines without emotions, how indispensable emotions are for human beings; emotions allow us to direct attention, ultimately guide how we process and deal with information, affect our memory, and how we make decisions. The effects are most visible when in a state where emotions are impaired or imbalanced, for example, when in states of depression or grief: suddenly, the process of going through daily routines has seemingly been unlearned; even simple decision-making tasks as to how/when to get up, what to wear, or what to eat for lunch appear nearly insurmountable.

When guiding our attention to the topic of love in the Gospel passage, whose main points are reiterated in the Epistle, we observe two main motions. One could be called the flow of love, from the Father to the Son, to us, and then to each other, culminating in the new commandment to, “love one another as I have loved you.” And the second is the interlacing of said love with all the commandments.

And oftentimes, when reading these passages and the new commandment, they sound foreign,

impractical, maybe naïve, and most certainly impossible. However, how we read and understand the word “love” stands in our way. Given how love is portrayed in popular culture, with an emphasis on the act of falling in love, love is primarily understood as romantic love, and maybe secondly, love is understood as kinship love, e.g., from parents toward their children. And although the Epistle refers to kinship as an explanation, the Greek word translated as “love” is “agape”. Agape love is, rather than romantic love or kinship love, more general than interest and warm regard in another person², which is much more comprehensive and distinct from romantic love and, at the same time, easier, as it has less of an overly emotional burden. One cannot make oneself emotionally love, let alone fall in love with a person. Still, one can direct attention and, as Weissenbacher argued, use emotions to guide decision-making. This understanding of love as directing and paying attention is that perception that pays attention to the nuances, to the details in a person or a task, and an attention that does not have to entrap in the sharp binary decision-making.

Understanding love in that sense, the two moments of the motion of love - the flow of love from the Father to the Son to us and among us, and the interlacing with the commandments - lose some of their opaqueness and become more tangible. There is the attention of the loving God as primary, as basic. We are seen; each of our hairs is counted. In attention to and out of care for our salvation, Jesus became incarnate, showing this Godly love in human form. And love can subsist only when it produces more love;

¹ Alan Weissenbacher, *Artificial Intelligence and Intelligence Amplification: Salvation, Extinction, Faulty Assumption and Original Sin in AI and IA: Utopia or Extinction*, Editor Ted Peters, ATF Press, 2019

² See Frederick Danker, *New Testament Greek Dictionary*, University of Chicago Press, 2009

love dies and perverts itself when it leads to diminishment, scarcity, and less love. In the indwelling of that love, in the abiding, staying in that love, it overflows; this is an emotion one might know when, in the fleeting moments of deep gladness, one wants to embrace the whole world. Therefore, the Holy Spirit, as illustrated in the readings from Acts, does not stop at human-defined boundaries, at legal thresholds, or where one draws a line in the sand. That love that produces more love is the love that is deliberating and transcends the enslavement of human existence. In that sense, the commandment to love and direct attention towards those around us is not only narrowly a reminder to take care of the people around us, to see and engage in the messy details rather than broad brush strokes, something that we often understand as a chore and maybe a curse rather than a blessing. On the contrary, it is the open permission to love and care, the permission to pay attention, not denying other people and pretending to live on an isolated societal island but rather coming to the fullest of our human existence.

Seen in that light, the intimate connection of love as directing attention in its interlaced structure with the commandments does not have to sound so alienating anymore. Our initial reaction is to see the commandments as entrapment, encroaching on our freedom. And yet, apart from maybe deep meditation, we always direct our attention, even inadvertently, to something. Love and attention can be directed toward what depletes and what is attention-seeking, staying on the surface without allowing us to see the details, depleting attention that is exploited by sensational information, thinly veiling commercial interests even within organizations such as our churches. Maybe one is most keenly aware nowadays that attention spans are limited compared to previous decades and centuries. Or one stays connected and abides in what feeds, fills, and overflows that love in order to evade the endangerment of losing what makes us human.

Discussion Questions

Acts 10:44-48

When was the last time someone entered your in-group unasked and uninvited? How did you feel about it? Is it a good or a bad thing if that has not happened in a long time or just happened recently?

Is the concept of love challenging insider and outsider boundaries? Is faith?

Psalm 98

When did you last want to sing a song of joy or otherwise express joy wholeheartedly? Do you allow yourself to do so?

Is that overflowing joy the psalm so eloquently refers to connected to being fully human, fully the image of God for you?

When you are feeling overflowing joy, is that connected to the concept of love? Does it have a connection to faithfulness or a promise that was fulfilled?

1 John 5:1-6

Do the commandments help you to stay within love or do you perceive them as a hindrance? Do you perceive the commandments as opposed to your freedom or do they set you free, as the gospel promises? Why would it be either one?

How would conquering the world by giving attention to what really matters look like?

John 15:9-17

When you hear the new commandment *that you love one another as Christ has loved you*, does it feel like a burden or does it set you free?

Have you ever thought about the new commandment, not as a demand but rather as a permission to love, permission to show compassion and *warm regard* when others might not understand it or society opposes it?

When thinking about emotions as directing attention, where during the day are you spending and directing your attention? Are there activities that are disrupting your attention? Which of the things you spend your attention on feed you, make love overflow? Which ones detract?