

Ways to Love

Readings: 'Those Winter Sundays' by Robert Hayden
'Leaning In' by Sue Ellen Thompson
'Live Oaks, New Orleans' by Jennifer Maier

Eleven years ago, I went on the worst date of my life. It was bad for a variety of reasons. We were not a good match. We struggled and failed throughout the evening to discover one common interest. We had disparate interests in books, movies, and music. My date had a brand new tattoo on his bicep that he was very proud of. It was a zombie clown being cut in half with a chainsaw. I have a weak stomach so it made me a little queasy to look at it. He had been hurt by the religious community he was raised in to such an extent that he refused to enter church buildings, even to participate in blood drives. At that point, I hadn't yet figured out ministry is my vocation, but I did spend hours at church every Sunday, attending the early service, coffee hour between services, teaching seventh grade religious education at the later service, and then going out to brunch with church friends. The conversation that evening came in fits and starts. We were a poor match.

It was a bad date because we were not well suited to one another, but my companion that evening also seemed to be unfamiliar with the courtship rituals of our culture. He asked me out for dinner at a pizza place and then said he wasn't hungry and didn't eat anything. As I ate my slices as he watched, which was awkward enough, he told me about how he only eats healthy food, making me feel even more self-conscious. When I asked him about his favorite books, his listed exclusively self-help books on anger management, relationships, and sexuality. There is nothing wrong with these sorts of books – they can be a great source of wisdom and can help us improve our lives. It is, however, poor judgment to list those books—and name one's areas of struggle—on a first date. There was not a second date.

I have thought of that evening's companion this week as I prepared this sermon, as I prepared to preach on love and two books – *The 5 Love Languages* by Gary Chapman and *The Art of Loving* by Erich Fromm—that might fit in that self-help category as they are rooted in psychology and teach the skills we need to have better relationships. These books, *The 5 Love Languages* especially, have been helpful to me in many of my relationships, romantic and otherwise.

The central premise of both of these texts is that love is a choice, a choice that requires hard work and sometimes sacrifice. It is liberating to have that named. Most of us know that love requires effort, but we often come to that lesson the hard way. The phrase 'falling in love' almost makes it sound like love is an accident we have no control over. And while attraction and infatuation might be beyond our control, the relationships that grow from there are not. The fairytales we consume as storybooks and cartoons as children often close with a wedding and the statement that they lived happily ever after. Perhaps they did, but those stories teach us that getting to the altar is the hard work and the adventure is over – and those of us in long-term committed relationships know that a wedding or other commitment ritual is just the beginning.

All relationships – romantic relationships, family relationships, friendships, and relationships with coworkers, neighbors and fellow church members take time and effort. We don't reach a milestone and then get to coast on, happily ever after from there. To love well takes effort and practice.

My sources for this sermon are:

Chapman, Gary. *The 5 Love Languages: The Secret to Love that Lasts*. Chicago: Northfield Publishing, 2010.
Fromm, Erich. *The Art of Loving*. New York: Harper Perennial, 2006.

In the *Art of Loving*, a book that explores types of love including romantic love, parental love, brotherly love, self-love and love of God, psychoanalyst Erich Fromm writes that overcoming our separateness is humanity's deepest need. Love what allows us to do this. The challenge is that we must learn how to love well. He writes, "The first step to take is to become aware that love is an art, just as living is an art; if we want to learn how to love we must proceed in the same way we have to proceed if we want to learn any other art, say music, painting, carpentry, or the art of medicine or engineering. What are the necessary steps in learning any art? The process of learning an art can be divided conveniently into two parts: one, the mastery of the theory; the other, the mastery of the practice. If I want to learn the art of medicine, I must first know the facts about the human body, and about various diseases. When I have all this theoretical knowledge, I am by no means competent in the art of medicine. I shall become a master in this art only after a great deal of practice, until eventually the results of my theoretical knowledge and the results of my practice are blended into one – my intuition, the essence of the mastery of any art."

Fromm continues, "But, aside from learning the theory and practice, there is a third factor necessary to becoming a master in any art – the mastery of the art must be a matter of ultimate concern; there must be nothing else in the world more important than the art. This holds true for music, for medicine, for carpentry – and for love. And, maybe, here lies the answer to the question of why people in our culture try so rarely to learn this art, in spite of their obvious failures: in spite of the deep-seated craving for love, almost everything else is considered to be more important than love: success, prestige, money, power – almost all our energy is used for the learning of how to achieve these aims, and almost none to learn the art of loving."

That is a powerful call to action. Can you imagine how different our world would be if people used even a fraction of the energy we spend pursuing success, prestige, money, and power to pursue love? That world would be unrecognizable.

Fromm asserts that the theory of love, the aspects common to all forms of love, are giving, care, responsibility, respect, and knowledge. He writes that the practice of love requires discipline, concentration, patience, supreme concern for practicing this art, and overcoming one's narcissism. Those are all rather broad, general concepts. What does that look like in practice? How do we learn how to love better on this Valentine's Day?

Gary Chapman, the author of the *The 5 Love Languages*, gives more concrete guidance. He is trained as an anthropologist and has done decades of marriage counseling and marriage seminars. In his work, he has come to the understanding that each of us has a "primary love language." The five love languages are not Spanish, French, Portuguese, Romanian, and Italian. Romance languages and love languages are different. The five love languages are the forms of affection that we most crave, the most effective and consistent ways we feel loved. Perhaps some of you are familiar with all of this already. The copy of the book that I read states the seven million copies have been sold. If this is old news to you, please appreciate that this is new news for some of us gathered today.

The five love languages are words of affirmation, quality time, gifts, acts of service, and physical touch. We all want all of these to some extent, but Chapman insists that there is one or, rarely, two that is primary for us. There is one that we most deeply crave, one that we equate with real love.

The first of the love languages is words of affirmation. Compliments. Praise. Encouraging words. Perhaps this is your love language. Perhaps you are like Mark Twain, who once said, "I can live for two months on

a good compliment." Perhaps having someone say, "I noticed what you did and I really appreciate it," makes the task worthwhile. If that describes you, your primary love language is likely words of affirmation. Next is quality time. This can be vacations together, nightly family meals, or a ten-minute conversation without any distractions with someone you care about. If, when you're with family, friends or a romantic partner, what you're doing matters less than that you're doing it together, quality time might be your love language. The girl in our story who asked for time with her father as her birthday present likely has quality time as her love language.

The third love language is gifts. The modern celebration of Valentine's Day, with its attendant cards, flowers, chocolates, and other gifts, might be a holiday thought up by someone with gifts as their love language. These folks feel appreciated when they receive gifts, not always huge gifts, but small thoughtful items, like cards or even a beautiful leaf or stone that a dear one saw and thought they would appreciate. If you have a shoebox full of precious things that people have given you over the years, perhaps gifts is your love language.

For people whose love language is acts of service, the most romantic gesture they can imagine might be taking out the garbage, doing the laundry, or cleaning a fishtank at 3 in the morning. These people know they are loved when the people in their lives do things for them. This is the love language of the father in the Robert Hayden poem I read earlier. This is the love language of waking up early to light the fire, the love language of polishing someone's shoes.

The final love language is physical touch. In a romantic relationship this is sex and all other touches – like the touch in the Sue Ellen Thompson poem, the husband resting his hand on his wife's neck, or on the soft flesh belted at her waist, and pulling her to him. It is sitting close together on a couch or putting an arm around someone. That physical closeness is what shows love to the person for whom physical touch is their primary love language. This is receiving hugs from friends or family. This is high fives from teammates.

As I went through these descriptions, did one jump out at you? Did you think, "that's me!" If you're not sure—and want to explore this further—there is a self-test you can take in the book or online at 5lovelanguages.com. Another helpful way to determine your love language is to think about what you complain about most. If you often think to yourself, "my boss never praises me," perhaps your love language is word of affirmation. If you wish your friends would spend more time with you, perhaps your love language is quality time. If you long for your spouse to do more chores, your love language might be acts of service.

If we know the love languages of people we are in relationship with, we can better express our love for them. We can better show them how much we love them. I'll give you a scene from my marriage. My primary love language is acts of service. I feel loved when Brian clears the snow from our driveway and tends to our son DeForest when he wakes up in the middle of the night. Romantic, I know. Brian's love language is quality time. He loves to spend time together – running errands together, taking daytrips as a family, having a good conversation at the end of the day. Before we talked about our love languages, I would try to show him love in my native love language, acts of service. I was following the Golden Rule – treating others as I would like to be treated. It didn't work particularly well. In the evenings after long days of work, I would wash dishes or do other chores. He did not experience that as love. We had a conversation about this and learned about one another's love languages. Now, I am trying to follow what is sometimes called the Platinum Rule – treating others how they would like to be treated. Do you hear the difference? It's about what the other person wants, not what I would want in their place. Those of us in relationship

with someone with a different primary love language – and that is most of us—need to become bilingual. I'm working to communicate with my husband through quality time, the love language he is most likely to understand. He's making similar efforts with acts of service. This effort has made a difference in our relationship.

While the original 5 Love Languages book is about improving marriages, this concept of love languages applies to other relationships as well. There are editions of the book for single people, for use in the workplace, and for improving relationships with children. Several years ago, a group of coworkers and I discussed our love languages. It improved our working relationships. With a coworker whose love language was words of affirmation, I became careful to tell him when I thought he did something well. After a coworker whose love language was gifts went above and beyond for me, I took him out for a blizzard at the Dairy Queen down the street from our office. I knew it was one of his favorite treats. Of course not all of the love languages translate as well into a work environment – physical touch can be especially challenging. Nevertheless, this framework can help us to know how to show appreciation in the ways that are most meaningful to the person we are trying to appreciate.

The 5 Love Languages and *The Art of Loving* are both insightful, helpful books. Before you rush out to pick up your copies or place holds at the library, I have some caveats. *The Art of Loving* was originally published in 1956 and reflects some of the prejudices of that era, especially in psychoanalysis. There are passages about homosexuality, women, and gender differences in parenting that make me want to throw the book across the room. Gary Chapman, the author of *The 5 Love Languages*, is an evangelical Christian. His understanding of marriage and divorce is different than the understandings most commonly held our liberal faith tradition. He has a complementarian view of marriage – that is that men and women play different roles in relationships with men as the head of the household and women charged with keeping house and raising children. He does not acknowledge same-sex marriages and committed relationships that are not marriages. If you read these books – you will probably have to use a mental “find and replace” function, recognizing the words and language that don't fit your worldview and replacing them with something that does – or just ignoring the passages that don't speak to you. I think it is worth sorting through what is problematic to find what is valuable.

So on this Valentine's day, may we choose love – as wonderful and challenging as that choice is.

May love be evident in our words, our touch, our time, our gifts, and our actions.

May everyone in our lives and in our world – romantic partners, family, friends, neighbors, strangers, -- everyone know that they are worthy of love.

May it be so. May we make it so. Amen.