

The 2001 movie musical, *Moulin Rouge!*, makes use of a number of pop songs rearranged in surprising ways. They take songs from the last part of the 20th century and repurpose them to tell a story set in Paris in 1900, many decades before any of the songs were written. And in the middle of the film they take this pattern even farther, combining a number of songs into an extended medley sung on top of and in an Elephant shaped room at the Moulin Rouge. The song is titled the "Elephant Love Medley."

This medley is made up of snippets of a number of pop songs about love. The lyrics range from ethereal and spiritual to earthy and erotic. Some of those lyrics say, "love." But they really mean something other than love. They really are talking about desire, or attraction, or lust. So it's quite a mixture. And the original artists range from the Beatles to David Bowie to U2 to Phil Collins to Kiss. It's quite a hodge-podge.

Perhaps the "Elephant Love Medley" is an appropriate model for the many ways we treat the single word "love" in our culture. The word, "love," carries a lot of freight, with a lot of different meanings. We use the word to mean so many different things. I love my wife. I love chocolate. I love my country. I love sleeping in on a Saturday morning. Those are very different kinds of feelings that we describe with the single word, "love."

On top of that, we have a secular holiday like Mother's Day today. Mothers are certainly known for being loving. Yes, there are some mothers who fall short. But by and large, mother love is a strong form of love.

And in three weeks we have another secular holiday, Memorial Day. We remember those who have sacrificed their lives for love of country.

And if that's not enough, this Easter season we've been reading from the First Epistle of John, a short book that continually talks about love.

Last week we heard from 1John that, "God is love."¹ God is love.

Those 3 words sound so simple: God is love. And yet, because of our culture, because of the different meanings we attach to that word, love, many adults fail to hear or to understand, or to believe those words.

God is love. But what sort or flavor of love is 1John talking about?

In NT times, the Greek language had numerous different words to describe things that we lump together with the single English word, "Love."

I've preached about seven of those New Testament words for love before, so I won't go into great detail. But I'll just mention a few highlights.

¹ 1Jn 4:8

First off, there was Phileo. That's where the name of the city, "Philadelphia" comes from. Some of you may have learned in school, Philadelphia means the "city of brotherly love." When the Greeks used the word, Phileo, they meant the kind of feelings you have for friends, or for brothers and sisters. Friendship. Brotherly, sisterly love. Phileo.

The Greeks also used the word, Eros. Eros is the root of our word erotic. This word describes desire, sexual attraction, romance, lust, all those things we often label as love, but are really different from real love. Actually, we live in a culture that spends a lot of time worshiping and pursuing Eros. We spend an inordinate amount of time trying to satisfy our every desire. This may be Eros, but in the New Testament sense it's not love, and given our culture, we need to be careful to remember that.

That doesn't mean that sex and romance and all the other aspects of Eros are bad. When kept in perspective they're wonderful. They can be healthy and joyful gifts from God. But they're not love, at least not in the sense that the NT is using the word.

When the writers of the NT talk about Christian love, or the love of God, they use a different word. They use the word Agape.

Agape was actually a rather uncommon Greek word. It originally described the love of a superior for an inferior.

More specifically, it described a love in which a stronger person sacrificed power on behalf of someone weaker. Agape, in Greek, meant a love that was self-sacrificing. A love which was interested in giving.

So when John writes, "God is Love, God is Agape," that says something amazing about the nature of God. It describes God's love in terms of gift and self-sacrifice.

If we say that 'God is love,' then everything else we say about God flows from this definition. God creates in love. God rules in love. God judges the living and the dead in love. But most importantly, God sends his only Son in love.

God's love is supremely made visible and manifest in sending Jesus Christ to be our savior. God takes the first step. God sends the Son, not because of anything we do, not because of our love for him, but because he first loves us.

And because we ARE loved, we have a response to make. We hear this in our Gospel this morning. Jesus says, "This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you."²

We ARE loved by God. Therefore, in response, we are called TO love. We are called to love God. And we are called to love each other.

² Jn 15:12

What John is telling us is this: Christianity is not simply a matter of loving God. Christianity is not simply about having a personal relationship with Jesus and ignoring everyone else. If we love God, then in response to God's love we are called to love each other as well.

We also heard this in our Epistle last week. 1John lets us know this in no uncertain terms: "Those who say, 'I love God,' and hate their brothers or sisters are liars; for those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen."³

And then 1John adds, "The commandment we have from (God) is this: those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also."⁴

Love the Lord your God. But also, love your neighbor as yourself.

It's not just a matter of having friendly feelings toward others. In truth, you can love someone without feeling friendly toward them. You can love someone without even liking them. Because love, at heart, is not about the way you feel. It's about what you do.

Love, in the NT sense, is a matter of sacrificing ourselves on behalf of others. In our Gospel, Jesus says, "No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends." Jesus is talking about sacrifice when he speaks of love. Giving up one's own life. Dying for someone else. That's the supreme act of love, Jesus says.

Yes, today is Mother's Day. A day of thankfulness for mother love. But in a few weeks, we celebrate Memorial Day, another day of love. On Memorial Day, we will honor those who have acted lovingly. We will remember those who, as Jesus says, have laid down their lives for their friends. We remember those who have sacrificed their lives on behalf of others.

So when you think of love in the NT sense, don't think of a the "Elephant Love Medley." Don't think of a romance novel or heart shaped box of chocolates. Instead, think of a military cemetery. Instead, think of a man nailed to a cross. That's a picture of true sacrifice, of Agape love.

Real love is costly. Real love involves sacrifice. Real love is concerned with the other, not with the self. Loving is never easy. Like everything else in this life, love takes practice. One learns to love by loving. Yet, we also love because we are loved.

We are able to love because God gives us the power to love.
We are able to love because God first loves us.

Beloved, let us continue to love one another, for love comes from God. And God is love.

³ 1Jn 4:20

⁴ 1Jn 4:21