

A Poem, a Hymn and a Silver Spoon

(preached on April 14, 2024)

When I returned to Southampton almost a year ago after 25 years in Virginia, I was welcomed by my family with open arms and an outpouring of love. I still get emotional as I recall that feeling. I was no longer a week-long family guest, but I was home.

I felt a similar but different love when I returned to this church. People who knew me from my semi-annual visits or knew my family warmly welcomed me and others smiled in acknowledgement.

I want to talk to you about Christian love with inspiration from a poem, the scriptures, hymns and a silver spoon. Stay with me now.

This is one of my favorite poems. Abou Ben Adhem by James Henry Leigh Hunt.

**Abou Ben Adhem (may his tribe increase!)
Awoke one night from a deep dream of peace,
And saw, within the moonlight in his room,
Making it rich, and like a lily in bloom,
An angel writing in a book of gold:—
Exceeding peace had made Ben Adhem bold,
And to the Presence in the room he said
"What writest thou?"—The vision raised its head,
And with a look made of all sweet accord,
Answered "The names of those who love the Lord."
"And is mine one?" said Abou. "Nay, not so,"
Replied the angel. Abou spoke more low,
But cheerly still, and said "I pray thee, then,
Write me as one that loves his fellow men."**

**The angel wrote, and vanished. The next night
It came again with a great wakening light,
And showed the names who love of God had blessed,
And lo! Ben Adhem's name led all the rest.**

This poem teaches us that to love our neighbor is to be blessed by God.

Candy asked me to be the lay minister two months ago, well in advance. I am great at procrastinating and feel I work best under pressure. The time came to start writing and I was drawing a blank. I sat at my desk feeling a rising panic and I heard a voice in my head telling me to OPEN THE BOOK. And there on the corner was my Giant Print Bible which had belonged to my father. The answer and my starting place were right there.

In the scripture of Matthew 22: 36-40 where a Pharisee, an expert in the law, asked Jesus a question to test or entrap him saying “Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law? Jesus replied “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and all your mind. This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: Love your neighbor as yourself. All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments.”

1 Corinthians 13:1 is familiar and included in many marriage ceremonies, including mine. “If I speak in the tongue of men and of angels but have not love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal.” In other words, just a lot of noise. And verse 13 sums it up: “And now these three remain: faith, hope and love but the greatest of these is love.

I realize the Second Great Commandment is familiar to most of us, but it is not as simple as it appears. I came across this phrase which really struck me: “**How can we love God whom we do not see if we don’t love our fellow man whom we do see.**” Who are made in the image of God.

There are many kinds of love. They vary from loving God, your family or your beautiful garden. I want to briefly mention four types of love: Three have Greek names. **Agape** is universal love such as for nature, God or the concept of altruism defined as “unselfish concern for the welfare of others.”

Eros is sexual or passionate love. Romantic love. Hence the word erotic.

Philia is friendship, shared goodwill. This is the love we have for our children and friends. Recall the city of Philadelphia known as the city of Brotherly Love. So named by the Quaker William Penn.

And finally, **Self-love** which can be healthy or unhealthy. Too much or too little affects how we think, feel and act. It reflects our relationship to ourselves, to others and to the world.

These types of love are not distinct. They can shift with the circumstances and our maturity.

I take great delight in hymns about love. Read them as poetry. This one is easy to memorize, and I think captures the teachings of our faith. Love Divine, All loves Excelling” this is the first verse: (be grateful I am not singing it to you)

**Love divine, all loves excelling,
Joy of heaven to earth come down,
Fix in us thy humble dwelling;
All Thy faithful mercies crown!
Jesus, Thou art all compassion,
Pure unbounded love Thou art;
Visit us with Thy salvation;
Enter every trembling heart.**

From the refrain from another hymn also by Charles Wesley

Amazing love! How can it be that thou, my God, should die for me!

How could I possibly be worthy? But by the grace of God.

And finally, you may be wondering about the silver spoon. I have collected full size silver teaspoons for quite some time. Finding them in antique stores and on eBay. I recall the delight of those small packages arriving in the mail. Well, about 30 years ago I had some serious surgery, and my college roommate sent me this silver spoon as a Cheer Up present. It has the emblem and initials GFS and the words: **BEAR YE ONE ANOTHERS BURDENS** and two lilies. I did some research and found GFS stands for Girls Friendly Society like the Girl Scouts but with a strong Christian basis. This group was started in Lowell, Massachusetts in 1877 to encourage the young girls employed in the new industrial factories. They worked long hours at tedious and sometimes dangerous jobs, lived in dormitories separated from their families, may have been orphans and sometimes were as young as 5 years old. They needed comfort, some type of family relationship and basic education. The Girls Friendly Society provided a community where they could share their burdens, make friends and receive Christian teachings.

Here in this church, we share each other's burdens and joys. Did you know there is a group here who pray for those on the Prayer List which is printed in the bulletin and requests spoken aloud each Sunday. This is an act of love. Carrying each other's burdens.

I recall these words from my church confirmation in the 7th grade.

“In the presence of God and these witnesses I take this to be my church and promise, as far as I am able, to observe its sacraments, share in its work, support and benevolences and endeavor to make it a fruitful body of Christians.

And another phrase-

And I promise to walk with my fellow members in faithfulness and Christian love.”

I am trying with God's help. AMEN

Elizabeth M. Grasty
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