

The third sermon in a series on love.

February 25, 2007

The First Sunday in Lent

The Language of Love:

Philia: Need a Friend?

John 15:9-21

The words are haunting, the melody is appealing, and the story line of the sitcom keeps us coming back:

*Making your way in the world takes everything you've got.
Taking a break from all your worries sure would help a lot.*

*Wouldn't you like to get away?
Sometimes you want to go*

*Where everybody knows your name,
And they're always glad you came.
You wanna be where you can see,
Our troubles are all the same.
You wanna be where everybody knows your name.*

*You wanna go where people are all the same,
You wanna go where everybody knows you name.*

(Gary Portnoy and Judy Hart Angelo)

Those who recognize the lyrics of the long-running, award-winning sitcom *Cheers* probably know the attractive tune, as well as the fact that the place “where everybody knows your name, and they're always glad you came” was a bar in

Boston. The fact that the characters were eccentric, yet committed to one another, gave an attractive aura to the program. Everybody longs for a place where people know your name and they're always glad you came.

We long wistfully for such a place because loneliness is a universal problem that many experts say is the most pressing, pervasive problem of modernity. Generation X novelist Douglas Coupland confessed:

I have never really felt like I was “from” anywhere; home to me...is a shared electronic dream of cartoon memories, half-hour sitcoms and national tragedies. I have always prided myself on my lack of accent—my lack of any discernible regional flavor. I used to think that mine was a Pacific Northwest accent, from where I grew up, but then I realized my accent was simply the accent of nowhere—the accent of a person who has no fixed home in mind.” (Life After God, cited by Stephen Bauman in Simple Truths, p. 86)

Loneliness is not the same as being alone. Solitude is often the sabbatical that sends one back to life and relationships refreshed and renewed. One may be alone and not feel alone, but all of us know that one may very well be in a crowd of people and feel desperately alone. The crowd of people may not be strangers, rather acquaintances and relatives who know and call your name, but still one may feel alone and alienated.

Remember, we heard the scriptures two weeks ago “It is not good for one to be alone.” I think the creation narrative teaches that God created people with the need for meaningful relationships with one another. If we live emotionally detached from one another, we will naturally feel lonely, even unloved and deserted.

Over a course of four weeks, I am inviting you to think with me about the seminal truth that God has created humanity with the need to be loved and to love others. I think that that is part of what it means when the Bible says that humanity is created in the image of God. In order to get at that truth I have proposed that we think about the four distinct words for love in the language of the NT.

Two weeks ago, we began this linguistic journey by considering the mysterious, beautiful sexual attraction between two people—*eros*. Last week, we considered the sacrificial, binding love of family—parents for children, children for parents, brothers and sisters. That word is *storge*. Next week, we shall consider the loftiest word in the Greek language and the unique way that the Christian community employed the word *agape* to describe God’s love for humanity.

Today, we take up the beautiful love of friendship, and most of us know the Greek word for that love—*philia*—the part of the compound word in Philadelphia that means “love.”

In his book about these four words, C.S. Lewis considers the unique posture of these loves. *Eros* suggests the posture of two lovers engrossed with each other, facing one another virtually oblivious to everything else around them. *Storge* may be pictured by a family circle, perhaps holding hands and cherishing the security of that family circle. As the gospel song asks, “Will the circle be unbroken, by and by, Lord, by and by....”

How would you depict the posture of *philia*—two, three, or an unlimited group of friends in association with one another? Lewis proposes that friends are not facing one another as lovers or in a circle as family. Rather friends are depicted side by side engrossed with a subject or activity. That subject may be literature, music, politics, religion, or anything of interest. The activity may be a club, sports team, a church project; any activity that involves people. By giving attention to that subject or activity, people really give attention to one another. People become friends by playing bridge, tennis, and golf. People become friends

by watching and discussing Wingate basketball, best-selling books, and world problems. People go to Kiev to work on a Village of Hope and come home with an inseparable bond to fellow missionaries, as well as Ukrainians. Women meet to plan, pray, and crochet shawls for the sick and dying. The latter receive a warm wrap that feels like a hug from God; the former build the love of friendship.

Philia is one of the great words in the NT language. The Greeks loved this word and employed it for many uses. *Philia*, *philos*, and its verb form *phileo* was used to describe the love for one's spouse, parents, children, work colleagues, neighbors, even the affection for the gods in Pantheon.

Philia may mean love, friend, or even kiss. In antiquity, as well as a good many contemporary cultures, kissing expressed non-erotic affection between family members and friends. Kisses were planted on the mouth, cheeks, foreheads, eyes, shoulders, hands, and in some cases to show great respect the feet. The early church imported this demonstration of love and friendship by encouraging one another "to greet one another with the holy kiss". (Romans 16:16; 1 Cor. 16:20)

Some early Baptist groups in America counted “the holy kiss” as one of the church ordinances, along with baptism, communion, and foot washing. I can hear some in our congregation now, “Pastor, perhaps we ought to go back to our roots.”

Those who visited some of the Greek Orthodox worship places in Kiev saw men and women bow and kiss holy relics. They were expressing respect and affection to God, as well as the particular saint represented in that relic.

When Soviet leader Leonid Breshnev visited the States he greeted political leaders with formal handshake, but when he was introduced to Chuck Connors, the tough Western actor, Breshnev greeted Connors with a bear hug and a kiss on the cheek. The look on Connors face showed surprise and embarrassment.

And, of course, we know the most famous treacherous kiss in history came from the lips of Judas.

In our gospel lesson *philia* and *agape* describes the great thing that God has done for us through Jesus Christ, as well as the relationship that Jesus prescribed for his people. “No longer do I call you servants...instead I call you friends (*philia*), for everything that I have learned from my Father I have made known to you....This is my command: love one another” (Jn. 15:15,17)

Jesus did not come to condemn people; rather the Son of God came as the great bridge builder between God and humanity. He came to build friendships, not only between heaven and earth, but also loving friendships between people who live in hatred toward one another.

Think about the ways that the gospels paint Jesus in relationship with people. He did not condemn the adulterous woman dragged to judgment by others. He built friendship. Jesus did not ignore Zacchaeus hiding in a sycamore tree. He invited him to lunch and built a friendship. Wherever we see Jesus in the gospels, we see the personification of *philia*, the friendship of God.

Jesus, friend of sinners, treats us the same way. He meets us where we are without imposing his will upon us. He gives us permission to face our darkness, as well as the light to guide us out of the darkness.

As I worked and prayed over this sermon, I reviewed two books that continue to make impression on me. John Powell combined good biblical work with a fine grasp of the behavioral sciences in a book entitled Why Am I Afraid to Tell You Who I Am? He talked about the loneliness that separates us from one another, as well as the games that we play, like putting on masks in order to

portray image that another might like. In essence, Powell says that many are afraid to tell others who they are because they fear if they are honest about their true selves others will not like them. As I reread Powell's book, I listened to this week's news coverage about the tragic death of Anna Nicole Smith, a sad Marilyn Monroe figure who needed—like all of us—to be loved and accepted.

The other book by Jess Lair has perhaps one of my favorite quotes from self help books. Like the Powell book, Lair's book also has a captivating title—I Ain't Well but I Sure Am Better. Here's the quote that brushes against my soul: “We need three things in order to survive and thrive: we need a family that loves us; a job that challenges us; and five people whose faces light up when they see us.”

Do you need a friend? Do you need to be a friend? The word is *philia*.