

## McCabe United Methodist Church

Lent, 2016: “Cross My Heart, Cont’d” (w/ The 5 Love Languages)

### ***To Bless and Not to Curse: “Words of Affirmation”***

Sermon on Luke 6:20-22, 27-28, theme Scripture: Galatians 5:13-18, 22-25  
Pastor Jenny Hallenbeck Orr

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If you worshiped with us during Advent and Christmas, you may recall our worship theme for those seasons was “Cross My Heart.”

Advent and Christmas are times when we focus on how, in sending Jesus into this world, God fulfilled a *promise* that had been made centuries earlier – a promise to give the people a Messiah who would bring them mercy and salvation.

Thinking about *promises*, the phrase “cross my heart” came to mind – a phrase generations of children have used as the sign of a promise: “Cross my heart, hope to die...” That phrase seemed so fitting for Advent and Christmas because, of course, the promised baby born in the manger grew-up to be the Savior dying on the cross.

The promise of Advent and Christmas is a promise from God's own heart. And, as we now journey through the season of *Lent*, toward the cross of Good Friday, it's so fitting for us to continue the “Cross My Heart” theme.

However, we're continuing it through a particular lens: the lens of *The 5 Love Languages*...and, through this lens, we'll explore five particular passages of Scripture where God's promised Messiah demonstrates love in very particular ways – *five* particular ways...five ways we humans are challenged to both *receive* God's love and to *share* God's love with others.

Because the best way we can respond to God's amazing love for us – the love shown in Jesus' sacrificial death on the cross – the best way we can respond to this holy love is by sharing that love with the world.

But I'll get back to *The 5 Love Languages* in a bit. Before we get into *The 5 Love Languages*, we're going to think about something that always goes hand-in-hand with any kind of *love* – and that is *vulnerability*.

It's not the easiest thing to think about, but, we're going to spend five weeks in Lent focused on receiving and sharing God's love...and, as we do that, we can't escape the reality that with *love* comes *vulnerability*...

I recently starting reading a book called *Daring Greatly* by Dr. Brené Brown. Dr. Brown is a social work professor and researcher who became quite popular in recent years after she began publishing and presenting research she's done in the areas of shame and vulnerability.

The title of this book – *Daring Greatly* – is taken from a speech Theodore Roosevelt gave in April of 1910.<sup>1</sup> (Of course, here in this part of the country, we have a deep appreciation for Teddy Roosevelt, since he had such a love for western North Dakota!)

The subtitle of Brené Brown's book *Daring Greatly* gives you a sense what it's about. The subtitle is this: “How the Courage to Be Vulnerable Transforms the Way We Live, Love, Parent, and Lead.” *Daring Greatly: How the Courage to Be Vulnerable Transforms the Way We Live, Love Parent, and Lead.*

To be *vulnerable* is to be at risk of attack – and we can be attacked physically, emotionally, and spiritually. Sometimes we are vulnerable by virtue of who we are, where we live, or what we do for a living. This is not good or bad, it's simple fact. *Life* is about being vulnerable – it's about being at risk of attack in some form or another.

We can get hurt in a myriad of ways in this life. That hurt can come from other people, it can come through accident or illness...we all know life brings us pain and struggle. Unless we want to live our lives hunkered-down by ourselves in the middle of a forest somewhere, just being alive makes us vulnerable. And, really, even hermits in the middle of the forest are still vulnerable to outside elements!

Vulnerability is a fact of life and, if we're honest with ourselves, we expend a lot of emotional and spiritual energy doing what we can to *protect ourselves* from life's inherent vulnerability.

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<sup>1</sup> The speech is called “Citizenship in a Republic.” Brené Brown quotes it on p. 1 of *Daring Greatly*.

We like to feel safe; we like to feel out of harm's way. This is why, for example, we feel so abundantly grateful for law enforcement and military personnel who work hard every day to keep us as safe as possible.

It's also why we feel so deeply saddened – and often deeply angry – when those public servants lose their lives in the line of duty. Life is precious and we should never take for granted those who put their own lives at risk in order to protect *our* lives and the lives of our dear ones.

Again, simply being alive makes us vulnerable to all sorts of attack. But, in addition to life's inherent vulnerability, we can also choose, at times, to make ourselves *more* vulnerable.

For example, being a parent – and taking it seriously – is an extremely vulnerable thing. I shared this in my Ash Wednesday meditation and I'll say it again now: it's been said that being a parent is like having your heart walking around outside your body.

And our hearts are so very vulnerable, aren't they? They're vulnerable physically, for sure – few things are scarier medically than serious heart conditions – but our hearts can be so vulnerable in a more metaphorical way because we use our heart as a metaphor for our emotions and our spirits.

For parents, loving your children makes you vulnerable because, whether biological or adopted, your children are a part of you – they are your very heart walking around outside your body: when they hurt, you hurt...when they struggle, you struggle.

Falling in – and *being in* – love also makes you vulnerable because romantic love is about giving your heart to someone who very well could damage or even break it.

Of course, even platonic love – the love between friends – makes us vulnerable. We entrust our stories, our worries, our failings, and our fears to our friends, hoping our friends will handle them with care...that, when we share our failings and fears, our friends won't reject us or judge us too harshly or use that information against us.

Relationships of any kind make us vulnerable...and, in order to experience the fullness of what human relationships can offer us, we have to risk being vulnerable with others.

No matter the relationship, relationships are always about giving a piece of our heart to another human being, trusting they will treat our heart with care...and knowing that, if they misuse or abuse our heart, the relationship *will* suffer.

With all that in mind, imagine for a moment this journey of Lent. Lent is a 40-day journey toward the cross of Good Friday...the cross to which Jesus was sentenced after being betrayed and denied by two of his closest friends...the cross on which Jesus suffered and died.

Jesus was God's Son; when God sent Jesus into this world, God's love was made visible...and God's own heart began walking around among us, entirely vulnerable in the way all of us humans are vulnerable.

That first Christmas 2,000 years ago, God said to the world, "Here is my Son, here is my very heart, beating in love *for you*...

"Take my Son...take this blessed Promise...take my very Heart and do with it what you will. Listen to him or ignore him. Treat him gently or treat him harshly. Believe him or deny him. Accept him or betray him. Receive him or reject him," God said to us. "Take my holy heart, my Son. He is my gift of love to you. Do with him what you will."

The season of Lent offers Christians everywhere the opportunity to reflect on God's great, promised love for us in Jesus Christ. The season of Lent also offers us the opportunity to seriously consider how we respond to that love in our daily lives.

And, just as with any other kind of love, receiving and responding to *God's* love is always an act of vulnerability...because love can always be received graciously, or it can be rejected.

This Lent here at McCabe, as we reflect on God's great love for us in Jesus Christ, we're using the lens of what's called *The 5 Love Languages*. It's my hope and prayer that, in using *The 5 Love Languages* this Lent, we will all grow in our ability to receive God's love – and that we will grow in our ability to *share* that love well with others.

*The 5 Love Languages* were developed as a concept by Christian counselor Gary Chapman. After years of marriage and family therapy, he discovered that many marital problems stemmed from the fact that spouses often didn't seem to speak each other's "love language."

Consider the languages we speak and hear in order to communicate with one another: English, Spanish, German, sign language, etc. If someone communicates with us in a language we do not speak, it's very difficult for us to understand them.

The opposite is also true: if we try to communicate with someone in a language *they* do not speak, *they* will have a very hard time understanding *us*.

We know this. Most of us have had experiences attempting to communicate with someone who doesn't speak the same language we speak. It's awkward – next to impossible sometimes. Gary Chapman believes the same principle applies when it comes to communicating *love* in any relationship. And he believes there are five primary "languages" through which each of us communicates love.

If someone communicates love to us in a love language that is not our primary love language, we may not understand it as love. And, of course, if we communicate love to someone in a love language that is not *their* primary love language, *they* may not understand our actions as love.

So...according to Dr. Gary Chapman, the 5 "love languages" are as follows: *Words of Affirmation; Quality Time; Physical Touch; Gifts; and Acts of Service*.

Since I'll be describing each of them during upcoming messages, I'm not going to offer definitions for each of these now.

However, I will take this moment to remind you that each of these love languages can be and *is* expressed within the context of *any* kind of relationship: romantic, friendship, collegial, familial, etc. It's especially important to remember this for when we get to “physical touch.” Like each of the other five, “physical touch” is about far more than romance.

For today, let's consider *Words of Affirmation*. If you are someone for whom Words of Affirmation is your primary love language, you crave kind and supportive *words... affirming* words. When someone offers a sincere compliment, or gives you genuine encouragement through spoken or written words, it *feels* like love to you.

Words of Affirmation happen to be *my* primary love language, so I understand this one intuitively. Regardless of the nature of my relationship with someone, if they offer me “words of affirmation,” those words feel like a sign of that person's love and affection for me.

When someone offers me a sincere compliment or gives me genuine encouragement *with* words, they are literally speaking my love language!

My husband, Derrick, and I were talking about this the other night and he joked that, for me – and for anyone for whom Words of Affirmation is their top love language – the phrase “actions speak louder than words” does not really apply. And it's true!

If Words of Affirmation is your top love language, genuine, sincere words *are* actions – and they speak love loudly and clearly. I say “genuine, sincere words” because, if Words of Affirmation is your top love language, you're probably also very sensitive to words that are empty and *insincere*. It doesn't take you long to figure out such words are *not*, in fact, words of love.

Right now, what I'm saying is probably resonating deeply with some of you: if what I'm saying about Words of Affirmation is causing you to nod your head or to think, “yep, sounds like love to me,” well, Words of Affirmation is probably a top love language for you.

Conversely, I'm guessing many others of you are listening to me and thinking, "Well, this just sounds needy. People shouldn't need to *hear* loving words: they should understand love based on what people *do* for them!" If you happen to be thinking something like that, well, Words of Affirmation is *not* one of your top love languages.

However, it *could be* a top love language for someone who is important to you...and, if they *understand* love best when someone offers sincere compliments or genuine encouragement with *words*, well, you better learn how to use words to communicate love to them. If you don't, you run the risk of them feeling *unloved*, even if you are trying to communicate love in other ways.

This same truth holds no matter the love language in question.

Next weekend, we'll have Love Language profiles available for you to take home. You'll be able to take the profile and discover your own top love languages...and, I hope you'll also seek to discover the top love languages of those who are dearest to you.

We'll have four types of profiles available: one for children, one for youth, one for single adults, and one for those in romantic relationships. These short profiles are available through Gary Chapman's Love Languages website, and I'm grateful we can produce and distribute them with permission and free of charge!

It's my sincere hope that, over the next weeks, many of you will take these profiles and will use them to grow in the way you communicate love in *all* of your many and varied relationships. After all, as I said earlier, the best way we can respond to God's great love for us is by sharing love *well* with others in this world.

The Scriptures we'll explore during this five-week Lenten series will offer examples of God communicating with us – through Jesus' words and actions – in each of the 5 Love Languages.

And, since the first love language we're exploring is *Words of Affirmation*, The Beatitudes struck me as the perfect scriptural example of God *speaking* loving words through Jesus.

“Beatitude” means “supreme blessedness.” “Beatitudes” is the word used to describe the set of statements Jesus made about *blessing* in today's reading from Luke chapter 6. Again, Jesus said:

“God will bless you people who are poor. His kingdom belongs to you! God will bless you hungry people. You will have plenty to eat! God will bless you people who are crying. You will laugh! God will bless you when others hate you and won't have anything to do with you. God will bless you when people insult you and say cruel things about you, all because you are a follower of the Son of Man...”

Through these Beatitudes, Jesus offers “words of affirmation” to the world's most vulnerable people. To the poor, Jesus says God's kingdom is for you...to the hungry, Jesus says you will have plenty to eat...to those who are crying, Jesus says you will laugh again...and to those who are persecuted with hatred and with cruelty, Jesus speaks words of blessing and assurance.

Because God's kingdom is about blessing and not cursing. God's kingdom is about experiencing and sharing words of *love* and kindness with others – even when love and kindness are not what others share with you. The Beatitudes are good news – they are words of affirmation to all who are struggling...so, if you are struggling, the Beatitudes are words of supreme affirmation and blessing to you.

If you are struggling right now, receive the blessing of Jesus' Beatitudes. Rest in these words. Dwell in them. Be grateful for them. Speak them to yourself over and over again.

But be aware Jesus continues with a serious challenge. In today's reading from Luke 6, in addition to speaking the Beatitudes, Jesus also said these words: “Love your enemies, and be good to everyone who hates you. Ask God to bless anyone who curses you, and pray for everyone who is cruel to you.”

When he was dying on the cross, Jesus – God's very heart – asked God to forgive those who were crucifying him...he asked God to bless those who were taunting him.

That he would speak words of affirmation – words of love – *from the cross*, to those who had nailed him there...what a Savior! *He* is God's great gift of love for us. *He* is God's ultimate Word of affirmation and blessing to the world.

As we journey through this season of Lent, may we receive Jesus into our hearts and lives – and may we respond to him by growing in the way we share love in this world. Let us pray...

*Almighty God, we are so grateful for the words of blessing you speak to us through your Son, Jesus. Keep us mindful of his words and keep us mindful of your supreme vulnerability in giving Jesus to us to be our Savior. As he spoke words of love to his first followers, may we seek to bless others with our own words of love. And, by our love for others, may the world come to know of our love for you; in Jesus' name we pray. Amen.*