

Lent, 2016: “Cross My Heart, Cont'd” (w/ The 5 Love Languages)
Objects of My Affection: “Gifts”
Sermon on Luke 9:10-17, theme Scripture: Galatians 5:13-18, 22-25
Pastor Jenny Hallenbeck Orr

“God so loved the world that he *gave* his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.”

These words from chapter three of the Gospel of John are easily recognized – and well-loved – by Christians the world over. “*God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son...*”

We believe in a God who is defined by generosity...a God who is the Ultimate Giver and who gave us the Ultimate Gift when Jesus Christ – God's beloved, begotten Son – was born into this world 2,000 years ago.

“*God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son...*”

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It's been said that having a child is like having your heart walking around outside your body. When Jesus was born into this world, God's very *heart* began walking around among us.

God loves us so much that we were given the gift of God's very heart: a gift from which we are invited to learn...to follow...to be challenged by.

Of course, we can *receive* the gift of God's Son or we can reject it. That may sound harsh – *rejecting* the gift of Jesus Christ – but the reality is that, when we are given *any* gift, we have the opportunity to either reject it or to accept it with gratitude.

And, while accepting or rejecting a gift is the burden of the recipient, it's also the *risk* taken by the giver. You know the potential pain of that risk if you've ever given a gift that was then rejected somehow. But...at the heart of *risk* is the potential for pain *and* the potential for triumph.

It was the risk God took in giving Jesus to this world. And it's the risk *we* take every time we give a gift to someone we love.

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We are now in the 4th weekend of the church season of Lent, the 40-day season during which we walk with Jesus – God's Son, God's very heart – to the cross of Good Friday. As we walk this Lenten path, we must acknowledge it was humans rejecting God's gift of Jesus that led to his crucifixion.

The ultimate risk God took in giving us Jesus was the risk that we humans would ignore him, mistreat him, or that we would be so scared of his message and so hostile toward him that we would feel the need to get rid of him completely. And, while not everyone rejected Jesus in so harsh a way, enough people with enough power did just that.

In fact, in the verses of Luke chapter 9 just prior to today's reading, we learn that King Herod had heard about Jesus and was beginning to get a bit concerned about what he and his disciples were doing: he was concerned about the movement being formed...a movement that had the potential to challenge Herod's authority and power.

Chapter 9 of Luke's Gospel begins with Jesus giving his disciples – his *apostles* – authority to teach and heal in his name.

Then, after giving them this authority, Jesus gave them instructions about how to go from place to place, town to town, offering that teaching and healing to others. So, early in Luke 9, the disciples went throughout their geographical region, sharing Jesus' message about God's kingdom and healing people in Jesus' name.

King Herod got wind that all this was happening and he started to get curious – probably more than a little concerned – about what was going on with this Jesus guy and his band of followers.

See, as is the case so often when leaders are not secure in their abilities, or when they are not confident they have the trust of the people they are called to lead, those leaders begin to get scared they will somehow lose what power they have. And when power-hungry leaders get insecure, they start to bully and they start to look for ways to eliminate whatever is threatening their position.

Or, in this case, they start to look for ways to eliminate *whomever* is threatening their position. And it was this precise kind of thing that led to Jesus' crucifixion and death on the cross. Fear, greed, and power-grabbing seeped into the religious and political leadership of Jesus' day, so they sought to get rid of him in the best way they knew how.

The season of Lent is a journey that invites us to look into our own hearts and minds for fear, greed, and insecurity...because such things are not just in the hearts and minds of leaders: they lurk in *all* our hearts and minds.

Not only to they *lurk* in our hearts and minds, but, such things as fear, greed, and insecurity also *leak out of* our hearts and minds through our words and our actions.

And, when fear, greed, and insecurity are the driving forces behind our words and actions, *love* gets crowded out. //

The sin of humanity led to Jesus' death on the cross...and we are only able to understand his violent death as an act of God's *love* because we know about Easter – because we know what happened next. //

Lent is a season during which we reflect on the sin that lurks in our own hearts and minds...a season when we ask God to help us grow *beyond* our sin so love can abound.

That's why it makes so much sense to look at Lent through the lens of *The Five Love Languages* – because the five love languages, as a concept, is all about letting *love* be the driving force in our lives...and it's about loving those around us as well as we possibly can.
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The 5 Love Languages were developed as a concept by Christian counselor Dr. Gary Chapman. After years as a marriage and family therapist, Dr. Chapman noticed that people seemed to give and receive love through five primary “languages.”

Words of Affirmation. Quality Time. Physical Touch. Gifts. And Acts of Service.
Whether we realize it or not, each of us receives and offers love in these five ways – and one or two of them tend to be the ways in which we receive and offer love *best* and most *naturally*. //

It's worth noting these are love languages with which we communicate in *all* of our relationships: romantic, friendship, familial, collegial, you name it. No matter the relationship, love will somehow be communicated in these five ways: *Words of Affirmation. Quality Time. Physical Touch. Gifts. And Acts of Service.*

The challenge lies in knowing how *best* to communicate love with those around us. Because, just like spoken languages, if someone communicates *love* to us in a “love language” that is not one of our own top love languages, we may not understand it as love...and vice versa.

The first week of this series, we considered Words of Affirmation. If Words of Affirmation is one of your top love languages, kind, supportive, affirming words *feel* like love to you. Two weeks ago, we looked at Quality Time. If Quality Time is a top love language for you, you crave the undivided attention of others: knowing someone is focused and attentive to you *feels* like love. Last week we considered Physical Touch.

For those who have Physical Touch as a top love language, it *feels* like love when someone is tangibly connected to you: a reassuring arm squeeze, sitting close together, holding hands, hugs, etc.

This week we're looking at the love language of receiving Gifts. And this one can be a little tricky for some Christians...

Very often in the church, we like to emphasize how we are not to place a lot of value and importance on material possessions or other tangible things. By and large, this is true...except, I would argue, in the case of today's particular love language. Because, for many of us, receiving a gift – receiving a material thing – is one of the ways in which we experience love *best*.

(As a bit of an aside, kudos to my very clever husband for coming up with the title for this sermon: “Objects of My Affection” is not only cute but also well captures the essence of this week's love language of focus!)

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In the “Gifts” chapter of one of Dr. Gary Chapman's books on *The Five Love Languages*, he tells the story of a widow who refused to get rid of an old rocking chair. The woman had moved out of her home and into an assisted living facility and, even though she didn't really have room for the rocking chair anymore, and even though her children had recommended she get rid of it, she wouldn't let it go.

If the love language of “gifts” is one of your primary love languages, you can probably guess why this woman kept the chair: it had been a gift to her from her late husband, given at a critical time in their life together. Her husband wasn't a natural gift-giver, but, when they had been expecting their first child, she mentioned to him how it would be nice to have a rocking chair in which she could sit while nursing the baby.

The woman wasn't even sure her husband had been paying attention... yet, lo and behold, a week later, he arrived home with the rocking chair. She rocked two children in that chair and would think of them – and, of course, would think of her husband – every time she saw it.

The gift was literally an object of her husband's love and affection. It meant the world to her and there was no way she'd ever give it up.

According to Dr. Chapman, “A gift is a tangible object that says, 'I was thinking about you. I wanted you to have this. I love you.' ... Some gifts only last for a few hours” – a dandelion picked by a child and given to a grown-up they love.

“Other gifts, like the rocking chair, endure for a life time. The important thing is not the gift, but the emotional love that was communicated by the gift. The right gift is any token, big or small, which speaks that emotional love...

Dr. Chapman goes on to say this: “A gift by its very nature is not payment for services rendered. When [someone] says, 'I will give you [this] if you will [do that]' the [person] is not offering a gift, nor is he expressing love. The person is simply striking a deal.

“A gift is given without strings attached.

“A gift is [also] not a gift when it is given to smooth ruffled feathers. Some...think... giving a gift will offset the harsh words they have spoken. “Some sons were instructed by their fathers, 'When you've done wrong, always get her flowers. Flowers cover a multitude of sins.' [But a] gift is a gift only when given as a genuine expression of love, not as an effort to cover over past failures.

In closing, Gary Chapman writes, “Gifts are visual symbols of love ... The gift can be any size, shape, color, or price. It may be purchased, found, or made. To the individual whose primary love language is receiving gifts, the cost of the gift won't really matter.”¹

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As I was planning out this Lenten love languages series, it seemed so appropriate to plan the *Gifts* emphasis for a weekend when we'd be celebrating Holy Communion.

Because what better time to acknowledge the importance of receiving “objects” of love and affection than a time when we'd be receiving the gifts of bread and cup – Christ's body and blood...*objects* representing God's supreme love for the world? And what better Scripture reading to connect with this theme than a story about Jesus multiplying gifts from something small, to something abundant?

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In our reading from Luke chapter 9, Jesus' disciples had just arrived back to him after their travels teaching and healing in his name.

They told him everything that had happened and then they *tried*, unsuccessfully, to get away from it all for some much-needed rest and relaxation. But a crowd of people found them – a crowd anxious to hear for Jesus to teach them about God...a crowd full of people needing his healing.

At the end of the afternoon, the crowd started to get hungry and restless. And so did the disciples: “Send the crowd to the villages and farms around here,” the disciples said to Jesus. “They need to find a place to stay and something to eat.” Jesus' response to the disciples is priceless: “*You* give them something to eat.”

It's almost like his way of saying to them, “I just gave you authority to do all things in my name...and you suddenly can't manage to handle *this*?”

At first, their excuse seems pretty practical: “We have only five small loaves of bread and two fish.” For a crowd of at least 5,000, that amount of food would seem quite limiting. But, of course, they also had *Jesus*.

¹ Gary Chapman in *The Five Love Languages: Singles Edition*. 57-59.

And Jesus can turn small gifts into *abundant* gifts. So he did. The people sat down, Jesus asked God to bless what food they had, and, in the blessing, and in the sharing, five loaves of bread and two fish became enough to feed the entire crowd – with leftovers to boot!

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“God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.”

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Jesus Christ is the ultimate “object” of God's love and affection toward the world – Jesus is the ultimate “object” of God's love and affection toward each of *us*.

Here, today, that holiest of gifts is present among us in the bread and cup of Holy Communion...we are simply asked to receive these gifts with gratitude: no strings attached.

As we receive these holy gifts from God, may they inspire us to grow in the way we give love to others in this world.

“For God so loved the world that he gave...” Thanks be to God. Amen.

And let us now turn to our celebration of Holy Communion...