

ON LOVE

JOHN ANDREW GALLERY

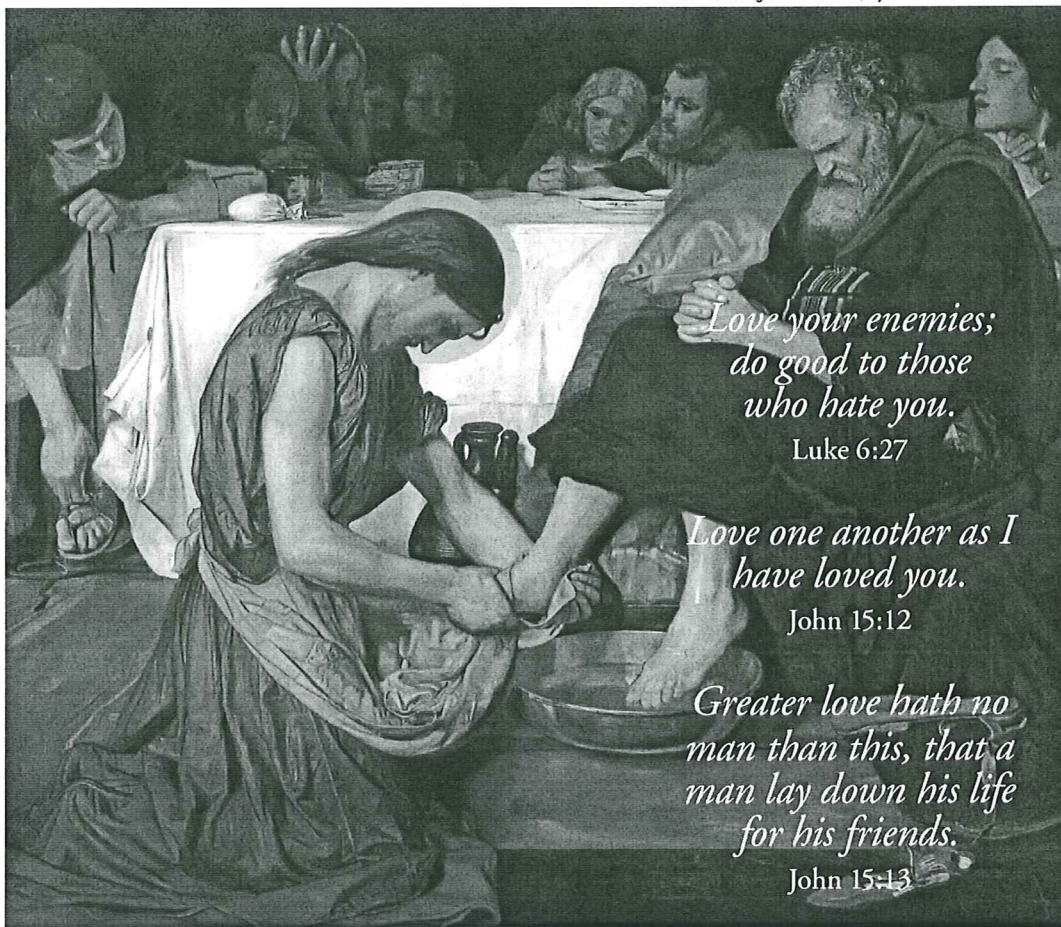
The Greek language has three words for the one English word “love.” I do not read Greek, and although I could, through scholarly research, find out which of those three words is used each time the word “love” is mentioned in the gospels, I prefer to take the context in which the word is used as a guide to its meaning.

The well-known phrase “Love your enemies; do good to those who hate you” (Luke 6:27) provides a definition of love that seems to me to be relatively consistent throughout the gospels. The structure of the first half and the second half of the sentence is the same, making it clear that the word love means “to do good.” Interchanging the words (“Do good to your enemies; love those who hate you.”) does not alter the meaning of the sentence in any way.

Love is therefore an action, not a feeling or an emotion. It is an action of doing good, that is, a positive action, one that is directed toward another person. The fact that we are directed to love, that is, to do good to our enemies—knowing that we are naturally inclined to do good for our friends—makes it clear that the willingness to do good is not influenced by the person who is the recipient. We extend good deeds to friend and foe alike.

This idea is well put in the Taoist text attributed to Lao Tze, the *Hua Hu Ching*. It says: “The first practice is that of indiscriminating virtue: take care of

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“Christ Washing Peter’s Feet”, by Ford Madox Brown, 1852

*Love your enemies;
do good to those
who hate you.*

Luke 6:27

*Love one another as I
have loved you.*

John 15:12

*Greater love hath no
man than this, that a
man lay down his life
for his friends.*

John 15:13

those who are deserving and also equally take care of those who are not.”

The fact that we are advised to do good to others regardless of who they are makes it clear that the inclination to do good comes from our own character, from the nature of who *we* are, and is independent of the nature of the other person. Neale Donald Walsh puts this in an interesting way: “When you decide . . . that your inner state of being is going to be peaceful, understanding, compassionate, sharing and forgiving no matter what the outer moment brings, then the outer moment has no power over you.”

Doing good to one’s enemies also suggests that we should be prepared to do good without expecting anything similar in return. The fact that we are willing to do good to our enemies in no

*Love your neighbor
as yourself.*

Mark 12:31

way means that they will be willing to do the same for us. Quite likely our actions may not change their feelings about us at all—perhaps they will over time—and that is fine and irrelevant. To do good to your enemy is to do good because you want to, because that is your nature, and not because anything is expected in return.

The phrase “Love one another as I have loved you” (John 15:12) forces us to stop and think about Jesus’ relationship with his disciples and what it meant for him to love them, that is to do good in relation to them. One vivid and radical example of his love is described dur-

ing the Last Supper in the gospel of John. The disciples have entered an upper room of a house somewhat secretly to share the Passover meal. It appears that there are no servants who would normally assist guests to wash the dirt and dust of the road from their feet when entering the house. So Jesus removes his robes, wraps a towel around his waist, and begins to wash his disci-

ple. One says to the other (I am paraphrasing), "This journey will be difficult, and we will only be successful if one of us leads. It does not matter to me if you or I lead, so you decide." The second man thinks this over and concludes that allowing the other to lead will be a generous act and will earn him good favor in the eyes of God. So he says, "You lead." At that the first man goes over

die. This hardly seems consistent with the overall character of Jesus' teachings, which celebrate life. For me "lay down your life" means to be willing to set the direction and activities of your own life aside for a while in order to assist another person's moving ahead with his or her life. A servant puts another's needs first, ahead of his own. He stops whatever he may be doing when called upon for assistance. A friend who does good for another does the same: he sets aside his own interests, the activities he is currently engaged in, and even puts the direction of his life on hold temporarily in order to help another. The definition of love offered by the psychologist Scott Peck captures this idea well: "Love is the willingness to extend oneself to nurture the spiritual and personal development of another person." This seems to me to be what is meant by laying down one's life for a friend.

At one point Jesus points out that the Jewish law says love God with all your heart and love your neighbor as yourself. He goes on to say (again, I paraphrase) "How can you say you are following the law when your brother has filthy clothes and is hungry and you have a fine house and nice possessions?" The implication is clearly that if you truly loved your neighbor you would be doing good by sharing your possessions, wealth and good fortune with others less fortunate. Love again

is an action, a positive action, but not only one of assisting another but one of sharing your possessions and good fortune as well.

The parable of the Good Samaritan summarizes and illustrates these definitions of love in a remarkable way. The story is familiar enough not to need repeating. But if we look at it as an illustration of what it means to love this is what it shows:

1. The Samaritan comes across a man in need. Although the story does not identify him as Jewish, everyone who hears this story, both now and I imagine then, assumes the man to be Jewish. Thus, the Samaritan helps someone he knows hates him, someone who sees him as an enemy, and some-



"The Good Samaritan," by a Dutch painter, 1537

ple's feet. Peter objects, but Jesus says that if Peter is truly to be one of his followers, then he must allow his feet to be washed. He does and Jesus proceeds to do all the rest, including Judas.

In this case, to do good might be defined as serving another. Jesus takes the lowly position of a servant, kneeling on the floor and doing a menial task. Elsewhere he frequently talks about the need to be willing to be a servant: "If any man desire to be first, the same shall be last of all and servant of all" (Mark 9:35). Here loving is not simply doing a good deed; it is serving the needs of another—an action, a positive action based explicitly on the needs of another.

I am reminded of a wonderful Muslim story told by al-Ghazali. Two Muslim men are preparing to start a jour-

ney and picks up the other man's pack as well as his own. "What are you doing?" the second says. "You said I should lead." When they reach camp for the night, it is raining so the first man sits outside in the rain holding a stick to support a cover over his sleeping friend. And so it goes throughout the journey, all the while the second man bemoaning the amount of good will his friend is earning with God, only because he was foolish enough to say "You lead."

Service to others is the highest good, the truest expression of love.

The phrase "Greater love hath no man than this, that he would lay down his life for his friends" (John 15:13) often seems to me to be misunderstood. For many the phrase "lay down one's life" is thought to mean a willingness to

- one he may see as an enemy, too.
2. The Samaritan cleans his wounds, gives him clothes, puts him on the donkey and takes him to the inn. These are the acts of a servant, of one who has set aside his own interests to attend to the needs of another.
 3. In providing this service the Samaritan lays aside his own life—that is, he delays whatever journey he is on himself, takes a side-trip to the inn that he wasn't planning on making, and gives over a good deal of the day he expected to spend traveling in order to assist the man.
 4. The Samaritan pays the man's expenses at the inn. Thus, not only does he share his time and his abilities by caring for the man, but he also shares his possessions and his money with someone in need, someone who at the time, at least, is less fortunate.
 5. Lastly, the Samaritan does all these things without expecting anything in return. He continues on his journey without leaving his name and he may or may not believe that the Jewish man, his enemy, would thank him; that is irrelevant to him and not a factor in his actions.

When William Penn said "Let us see what love can do," he did not sit at home and think fond thoughts about the Native American population of his colony. He went out and signed a treaty with them that respected their interests and established a basis for peaceful co-existence between colonists and Native Americans. He took a positive action and did good to people who were at least strangers, if not enemies.

So, the next time you hear yourself using the word "love," think of what it truly means. Understand that it is not a nice feeling or an emotion but concrete actions, as indicated by these phrases, illustrated by the parable of the Good Samaritan, and summarized quite succinctly in the *Hua Hu Ching*:

"To practice virtue [to do good] is to selflessly offer assistance to others, giving without limitation one's time, abilities and possessions in service whenever and wherever needed, without prejudice concerning the identity of those in need."

And then, as the man who first heard the parable of the Good Samaritan was advised to do at the end of the story: "Go thou and do likewise." □

CYCLES

Spider-spun fairy fences
Guard my morning walk;
Bathed in night mist,
They sparkle ghostly patterns
To keep me on my path.

Crunchy drifts of fallen leaves
Spread a richly colored carpet
To guide me along the way,
And the sleepy sun stirs
Pink-washed crimson into the clouds
As it rolls slowly up over the rim
Of today.

Nature closes down summer so skillfully,
And we are touched by autumn's beauties
Even as the slow heartbeat
And chilled white fingers of winter
Pulse slowly up through the tightening, cooling earth.

Seeing you, my friend, my heart,
Drinking in your goodness
As a too early winter
Creeps through your veins
In a process sped up and charged with pain
Is watching a comet
Scream silently past,
Too soon gone
And perhaps because of that, overly brilliant and beautiful.

And with this,
Sensing my own slow decay
As frost touches my hair
And stiffens my joints
And my mother, long gone,
Peers back at me from mirrors—
I move through the changing season
With you and with myself
And marvel at the complex rhythms
Of living and fading and dying
As gossamer filaments of love and memories
Keep me on my path.

Peggy Monroe

*Peggy Monroe lives in
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