

**New St. James Presbyterian Church, London, Ontario
Sunday, May 21, 2017**

Rev. Andrew Reid

Acts 17:22-31; Psalm 66:8-20; John 14:15-21

“Giving and receiving”

I don't claim to be any sort of profound thinker. After 10 years of listening to my preaching, I know exactly what you are thinking: 'Tell me something I don't know.' Don't deny it: I can read you like a book. I have never expected to be invited to join the Amalgamated Union of Philosophers, Sages, Luminaries and Other Thinking Persons that you read about in *The Hitchhikers Guide to the Galaxy*. Philosophical, abstract, theoretical thought is not my comfort level.

But I want to wax a bit philosophical this morning, because the texts for today raised a couple of questions for me. First question: can there be love without something to love? Can love exist as a purely theoretical, abstract proposition? Or must there be an object of love for love to exist in the first place? The second question is related to that: is it truly love if that love is never expressed? What is love if it is never expressed, never communicated, never put into concrete, tangible, visible action?

These questions were sparked by reading the New Testament text for today, especially the part about the Areopagus in Athens where Paul came across *an altar with the inscription, “To an unknown god”* Acts 17:23. Is it possible for there to be an unknown god? Or does the existence of a god mean that she or he must be known to the worshippers of that god? I have to say that I find it hard to conceive of a god in isolation, segregated, cut off from any contact with her or his followers.

After all, it was only when Paul proclaimed to the Athenians the God who made the world and everything in it; the God who is Lord of heaven and earth; the God who gives life and breath to mortals, who allotted the times of their existence and the boundaries of the places where they

would live; the God in whom we live and move and have our being; it was only then that the unknown god whose altar he had spotted took on meaning and consequence and worth.

In today's Gospel text, Jesus talks about loving and being loved, and about the way love is expressed, and communicated, and put into concrete, tangible, visible acts of love. *'If you love me, you will keep my commandments . . . They who have my commandments and keep them are those who love me; and those who love me will be loved by my Father, and I will love them and reveal myself to them'* John 14:15,21.

Loving and being loved; giving and receiving love; loving and showing love; these are woven together, woven together so tightly that they cannot be separated. There is nothing theoretical or abstract about the kind of love that Jesus is talking about here. It is real and expressed and communicated. It was put into concrete, tangible, visible action in the birth, life, death and resurrection of Jesus himself.

So, can there be love without something to love? Can there be love without an expression of that love? Maybe we should think about it this way: God is eternal. James 1:17: *Every generous act of giving, with every perfect gift, is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change.* And God is love. 1 John 4:16: *God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them.* Therefore, it follows that there was love in the eternity of God before there was a human race for God to love.

But in the eternity of God, that love found its first expression in the relationship that existed within the Godhead, among Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Only then did it find expression in love for the human race that God created. It found its highest expression in the birth, life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ our Lord and Saviour.

And it finds expression today in the interweaving of love, the giving and

receiving of love, God's love for us and our love for God, through the work of the Advocate, the Spirit of truth. It finds expression today in the concrete, tangible, visible – and sometimes costly – acts of love shown by followers of Jesus Christ.

In her commentary on this passage, Nancy Ramsay, Dean of Brite Divinity School in Fort Worth, Texas tells this story. In his novel *Ah, But Your Land Is Beautiful*, Alan Paton describes a situation in South Africa during apartheid, when the law kept black South Africans separate from white South Africans. After the death of a white South African official who had worked within the system to humanize life for the oppressed, and despite the wishes of the official's family, the blacks, were turned away from his funeral. It was a terrible insult.

Isaiah Buti, a black pastor, visited the white chief justice, whom he considered to be a friend to his oppressed people. He asked the judge to participate in the Good Friday service where the congregation would observe Jesus' practice of washing the disciples' feet. He asked the chief justice to wash the feet of a woman who was a member of the congregation. She had been a servant in the judge's home and had cared for his children.

The chief justice readily agreed, though he asked to participate in the service without any special announcement or acknowledgement. When the time came, the judge came forward and washed and dried his servant's feet. But before he rose to return to his seat, he took her feet and gently kissed them both.

Ramsay concludes: it was a gesture that set healing in motion, because in that simple extra expression of care, he disclosed the truthfulness and the life-giving power of God's love. Of course, the act became known and the judge's career was affected, but he had no regrets, because he too experienced the life-giving power of love that helps us recognize each other as neighbours.

An act of love. Concrete, tangible, visible, costly love. Shown by a follower of Jesus Christ. What was it Jesus said again? *'If you love me, you will keep my commandments . . . They who have my commandments and keep them are those who love me; and those who love me will be loved by my Father, and I will love them and reveal myself to them'* John 14:15,21.