

Love Connections

How many of you have ever watch the television program called “Love Connection?” It is a dating game show, which first aired way back on September 19, 1983, and has been off and on ever since then. For a time it was even rated as the third most popular game show, behind only Jeopardy! and Wheel of Fortune. It currently runs on the Fox network.

The main premise of the show is to arrange dates for couples. A guest would appear, together with three contestants of the opposite gender. The guest will already have gone on a date with one of the three, choosing on the basis of videotaped profiles. Then on the show the guest will tell the host and TV audience about the date. It’s the audience’s job to help the guest decide whether that first date had been successful, and whether she or he should go on a second date with the same contestant, or one of the other two contestants. As you might guess, the criteria of which pairing might make the best match are rather shallow, and include physical appearance and build, how the contestants are dressed, and an assessment of their personalities. A successful date is finally dubbed by the host a “love connection.” Hence the title of the show.

Today’s text from the Gospel of John is certainly not a dating game show. But it is very much about making a love connection. Or rather, “connections” (plural). And you might say that we are all contestants.

You’ve probably heard in a previous sermon or Bible study that in the ancient Greek language there were at least three different words for love. There is *eros*, which can be considered “erotic” love. There is *philos*, which is often used for the love between friends or family (you may know that the city “Philadelphia” means “brotherly love”). And then there is *agape*. And for now at least, at the risk of being misinterpreted, I’m going to translate *agape* as “true love.”

It happens that the word love appears 57 times in the New Revised Standard Version of the Gospel of John. Compare that to 13 in Matthew, 15 in Luke, and only five in Mark. The word “love” and its cognates appear nine times in this morning’s passage alone. And all nine are based on the Greek word *agape*. It’s safe to say that in this brief passage, Jesus teaches us about the “love connections” in life that matter most. I’m going to talk about five of them.

The first I will call “the connection of abode.” What is an abode? It is where we live, right? Where we reside. Hang out. Spend most of our time. In verse 9, using the verb form, Jesus tells us to “abide in my love.” Live in my love. Dwell in my love. Hang out in my love. Be at home in my love. Almost as if love is a place, or perhaps, a space.

So, who else is there, living with us? Well, Jesus is, according to him. And not just Jesus. God, whom Jesus calls “the Father,” lives with us, and we with him. (And her, when we talk about God as Mother). In the Gospel of John, there is this reciprocal relationship between Jesus and God. When we get one, we get the other. When we obey one, we obey the other. When we love one, we love the other. When we are loved by one, we are loved by the other. In the previous chapter, John 14:23, Jesus says, “Those who love me will keep my word, and my Father will love them, and we will come to them and make our abode with them.”

Who else is there? We just heard: those who love Jesus and keep his word. That presumably includes not just all of us (assuming we all love Jesus and do our best to keep his word), but people all over the world. When we love Jesus, we live with Jesus, and God, and one another, and people all over the world. Did you know you have such a family?

The second love connection I will call “the connection of covenant.” A covenant is an agreement, a binding promise between two or more parties. We first hear about covenant in the Old Testament, namely God’s covenants with Noah, then Abraham, then Moses. In the covenant with Moses, which included not just him but all the people of Israel, the covenant was comprised of commandments (namely 613 of them), and it included promises. One promise, really. Obey my voice, and I will be your God. Note, first of all, that this covenant is conditional. In this morning’s passage, 15:10, Jesus says “if” you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love. There is no guarantee. There is, rather, an “if-then” clause in our connection of covenant. We have a choice to make. “If you keep my commandments.”

Does that sound daunting? Yes, it does. Especially if there are 613 of them. But here in this morning’s passage from the Gospel of John, Jesus simplifies it, by reducing it from 613 to one. “This is my commandment [singular], that you love one another.” Okay, so it still sounds daunting. Look around the sanctuary. Do we love one another, the way Jesus loves us? Think about people all over Wichita, all over our country, all over the world. Do we love them, the way Jesus loves us? Like I said, we have a choice to make. And we must make it every day. But the promise definitely makes the choice worth it. Call it our “connection of covenant.”

Third. I have already mentioned that our covenant with Jesus and with God includes both commandments and promises. In this morning’s passage, the promises are put in various ways, including the promises of a connection of abode and a connection of covenant. But one promise in particular stands out. In 15:11 we read, “I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete.” Reminds me of the camp song [sing it], “This is my commandment: that you love one another; that your joy may be full . . . that your joy may be full.” This is our third love connection: “the connection of joy.”

What is joy? Is it the same thing as happiness? I think we already know that it is not. Happiness, even at its very best, comes and goes. At its very best, happiness is fickle. Happiness is partial, incomplete. Joy, on the other hand—Jesus’ joy—is complete. It’s more like contentment than happiness. It’s not a feeling so much as a state of mind. And unlike happiness, joy—once we have it—lasts. [Sing: “I’ve got the joy, joy, joy, joy, down in my heart.” There are sure some great children’s/camp songs!]

Our fourth love connection is going to seem counter-intuitive, especially on the heels of the connection of joy. It is the connection of sacrifice. Wait—what’s this all about? What are we sacrificing? A pigeon? A sheep? Nope. We are to sacrifice ourselves. (Oh, is that all?!!) In fact, *agape* love, the Greek term and the kind of love Jesus is talking about here, is sometimes called “sacrificial love.” In verse 12 Jesus said, “This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you.” How did and does Jesus love us? Sacrificially. By sacrificing his very self. Or as he spells out in the very next verse, “No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends.” That is what *agape* love looks like. It looks like a cross. A willingness to suffer, even to die. It looks like Michael Sharp (who gave up his life one year ago in the Democratic Republic of the Congo). *Agape* love, sacrificial love, true love, puts the other

person first. Whoever that may be. Our spouse. Our children. Our fellow church member. Even a person who wants to do us harm. When we live in *agape* love, we are joined together by a connection of sacrifice. And remember: this connects us not just to one another, and to people all over the world, but to the crucified, resurrected Jesus. In other words, to God.

Our fifth and last love connection I will call “the connection of purpose.” Jesus, as we have already heard in verse 12, spells out this purpose in the form of a commandment, namely that we love one another as Jesus has loved us. He repeats it in this morning’s final verse: “I am giving you these commands so that you may love one another.” This is life’s purpose. This is the meaning of life. (In case you’ve been wondering).

But let me up the ante, and the incentive. Jesus didn’t just lay the purpose out there, for us to take our leave. Jesus calls us to this purpose (which still means we can take or leave it, choose it or ignore it), but it’s more, we might say, personal. Jesus personally calls each one of us. Let me put it that way Jesus does in verse 16. “You did not choose me but I chose you . . . I appointed you to go and bear fruit . . . that will last.” By the way, Jesus adds an additional small promise here, namely that if we accept his call to bear fruit, “the Father will give you whatever you ask him in my name.” That rather sweeping promise needs a little bit of unpacking and qualifying, but I’ll save that for another sermon!

For now, think of it this way. The program that we are participants in is called “Love Connections.” And not only are we all contestants; we are all winners! We have all been chosen by the host of the show to go on one life long “date” with Jesus. Together—we’ll all be going together. And I hope you don’t mind if God goes along! After all, we are connected by love.

Amen.