

HEAVEN TO THE LONELY

February 3, 2019

Epiphany 4

[Psalm 71:1-6](#)

[1st Corinthians 13:1-13](#)

(prayer) *Open our hearts, O God, to encounter your word with fresh ears today. Amen.*

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In the late 1980s, Canadian songwriters, David Tyson and Christopher Ward, penned two songs that launched the career of a rock singer from Toronto. In the heyday of music video TV channels, Tyson and Ward's songs [Love Is](#) and [Black Velvet](#) were both released as singles on the self-titled debut album of [Alannah Myles](#).

Both songs were nominated for Juno Awards in 1990 (The Canadian Grammys): actually competing against each other for *single of the year*.

Black Velvet (deservedly) won.

Ward and Tyson won the Juno for *best composer*. And Myles won for *album of the year* and *most promising female vocalist*. She went on to win the 1991 Grammy for best female rock vocal performance for Black Velvet.

Alannah Myles continued to record and release albums into this decade, but sadly, as it sometimes goes in the music industry, that 1989 debut album was the peak of Alannah Myles' career.

It all started with the song, "[Love Is](#)". A rock song about the precious, but elusive nature of love... it can be hard to get, impossible to hold and yet, sometimes it is simply all we have to give.

Have a listen.

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I didn't play the video because I thought that the black leather and red shoes and lipstick might have been distracting.

But, I'll put a [link](#) to the video with my sermon on the website.

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Love is...

- Hard to get
- Impossible to hold
- Straight as an arrow
- Like a burnin' fuse in the long cold dawn
- By the side of the road: a hopeless case
- A perfect thing

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Love is...

- patient
- kind

Love...

- rejoices in the truth
- bears, believes, hopes, and endures all things
- never ends.

Rev. T. Blaine Gregg

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Anyone who has heard (or read) my sermons over the last two Sundays, may remember that today is the third week in a row that the [revised common lectionary](#) has offered us a reading from the core chapters of the First Letter to the Corinthians.

The context of the Apostle Paul's correspondence to this early Christian community is the the Corinthian church was struggling with disagreements and divisions among them. Paul had received a series of complaints and reports about:

- people were lining up behind their preferred leader, and disparaging others;
- people were ranking the gifts and skills and activities that people could offer to the life of the church;
- some people were looking down on others who came to their faith in Jesus from different religious background;
- some looked down on those forced to live as slaves;
- some were treating women as less than men when it came to their ability to living out their faith;
- some people were treating community meals, *not as remembrances of Jesus' last supper*, but as an excuse to selfishly over-eat and over-drink.

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Over the past two Sundays, we heard Paul's words from 1st Corinthians chapter twelve, where he argued that *the varied gifts people offered* **all** came from one spirit and that (although different) these gifts were valuable parts of a bigger whole: The Common Good, as Paul called it.

For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and we were all made to drink of one Spirit.

(1Cor12:12-13)

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I have preached that Paul's sermon (in reaction to the reports of divisions) seems to be that differences are not the problem. Paul's concern was that differences were getting in the way of serving God together and appreciating the benefits that come from variety. But mostly Paul seems upset that some of the Corinthians were closed to the ability of the Spirit to *connect us* through something *other than* complete sameness and uniformity.

The Corinthians were following a way of competition and exclusion.

The Apostle invited them to strive for greater gifts than they have now (or can even imagine having). And... he offers them "a still most excellent way" (1Cor12:31).

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The way of agapé.

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Agapé is one of the [Greek words](#) that get translated into English as "love". Two other common greek "love" words are: philia and eros.

Philia (φιλία) refers affectionate regard, friendship, usually between equals. It is used to describe loyalty to friends ("brotherly love"), family, and community, and philia requires virtue, equality, and familiarity.

Eros (ἔρως) refers to sexual passion. It is the root of the word erotic.

Agapé (ἀγάπη) is used to express selfless attitudes and actions - the King James Version of 1st Corinthians translates agapé as "charity". Most often, Agapé is described as *unconditional love*:

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perhaps experienced as the best of one's feelings for their children or spouse. The 11th century priest and theologian, Thomas Aquinas, agreed with Aristotle and described agapé as "[being concerned for] the good of another."

Agapé refers to the kind of love God has for us.

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It is fair to describe agapé as the highest form of love.

ASIDE: a detailed bible study on John, chapter 21 will take note that when the story of the risen Christ (three times) asking Simon Peter: *do you love me?* Do you know that passage? In the greek language of the text, the author uses agapé for the first two questions and philia the last time. *What does that mean?!?* Especially when we consider that the words Jesus may have actually spoken to Peter would have been Aramaic, not Greek.

A topic for another day.

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The still more excellent way (promoted by Paul in 1st Corinthians 13) to take the path that confronts the pitfalls of divisions and disharmony is... the way of unconditional love.

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I think that it can be relatively easy to imagine people loving god without reserve.

And agapé can be easy to imagine coming from God. Although, some Christians actually do ascribe conditions for God's love... do this and God's love will be given to you.

The challenge is believing that people are capable of agapé with other people.

Let's be honest, even with those who are dearest to our hearts, there could be a situation where our ability to love them might reach its limit.

Full and complete agapé might actually be elusive within the human experience: *hard to get; impossible to hold.*

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I accept the truth about myself that I may not be able to "love" with any conditions: when I am hurt by another, when I am disappointed or discouraged. At my best - with the right person, at the right time - I might come close.

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I like the fact that Paul includes in his *definition* of agapé, examples of what love is and isn't. Like the original Corinthian readers, can bring to mind times when each example was real moment in my life.

I have had moments of kindness and patience.

And... moments of open rudeness.

I have openly celebrated what is right and just.

But... I have also taken a measure of joy in another's misfortune. I have most definitely been poisoned by jealousy and envy.

I have lived times of deep hope and faith that have allowed me to endure and work through all sorts of personal hardship.

And... I have been arrogant and prideful; and I have tooted my own horn for no reason other to view myself as better than someone else.

I can try to believe that *love never ends*, but "I" have given up, at times.

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Philia is hard.

Agapé is almost certainly impossible.

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And Paul knew that. He wasn't preaching agapé and inviting the church to dream an impossible dream.

To me, the key verse in 1st Corinthians chapters 12 and 13 is (ironically) one that I left out of the reading last week because I stopped at 12:20. The next eleven verses of chapter 12 include Paul expanding the body with many parts metaphor by pointing out how silly it would be if the whole body was made up of feet. Then the Apostle comes full circle on the gifts of the spirit that began the chapter by rhetorically asking: Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Are all teachers? Do all work miracles? Do all possess gifts of healing? Do all speak in tongues? Do all interpret?

Verse 31 - the *bridge verse* between the themes of chapter 12 and the love lesson of chapter 13 - invites the church to look beyond their particular gifts and even how they fit in with the gifts of others by opening themselves to something more: *Strive for the greater gifts!*

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The more excellent way of agapé is less about achieving full and unconditional love and more about striving for it, working for it, learning it, practicing it.

The more excellent way of love is a journey not a destination.

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When I work with couples preparing to be married, I invite them to look at ways to deal with conflict and how it might be different within a caring relationship as opposed to other conflicts in life. One of the key things I encourage couples to remember in the process of working through conflict in their relationship is honour and celebrate progress. Even when we have not got to our desired end point, we should appreciate how far we have come. Not that we should get complacent, but that we should focus at least as much on how far we have come as we do on how far we have to go.

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And so, we can identify ourselves as being on the way of love when we strive to move forward bit by bit.

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To do this, I think we can start where Paul starts: with Patience and Kindness.

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Kindness is a pretty obvious fit with agapé.

Honest kindness is shown when we are friendly to people we just met. Kindness is a proactive attitude that presumes strangers are potential friends. Kindness starts with hope rather than mistrust.

Kindness (as a life skill) is in direct competition with quick judgments and presumptions. Obviously the worst of the -isms and -phobias fight against kindness: racism, homo- and transphobia, sexism, classic, etc. But, so do the small judgments and presumptions based on a person's age or what they wear.

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Last Monday, a chef from a restaurant in the San Francisco area sent out a tweet that made some news: "if you come to my restaurant wearing a [Make America Great Again] cap, you aren't getting served".



J. Kenji "Individual Fun" López-Alt
@kenjilopezalt

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It hasn't happened yet, but if you come to my restaurant wearing a MAGA cap, you aren't getting served, same as if you come in wearing a swastika, white hood, or any other symbol of intolerance and hate.

Now, personally I am not necessarily a fan of the isolationist uber-nationalism often associated with the MAGA movement, I am not quite ready to equate a red baseball cap with a nazi swastika or a KKK white hood, as the chef did in their tweet.

I am not naïve to the reputation that the MAGA hat crowd has (justifiably) earned, but if agapé is going to be possible, I will need to try to *not* let my (potentially) competing world view outweigh my capacity to be kind.

The ability to be kind to someone who might not return the favour is a hallmark of agapé and certainly consistent with Jesus' *turn the other cheek* sermon.

The tweet in question has since been deleted and the chef issued a written apology.

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In response to this story, although she prefaced it with her usual diatribe against liberal intolerance, I actually was heartened to notice that, on Thursday, FOX News' Laura Ingraham [encouraged](#) people wearing MAGA hats to "show everyone around you what true tolerance, kindness and inclusiveness looks like."

Of course, it might not be true, authentic kindness if your only motivation for being kind is to get other people to think better of you, but maybe it will be habit-forming and the world will be better off as a side effect - which is not a bad thing.

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Bottom line: being kind (for no other reason than to be kind) can help advance us down the road of agapé.

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Love is kind. Love is also patient.

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Patience should not be confused with capitulation. Patience is not putting your own needs aside. Patience is a recognition that each person thinks and works through things at different paces. In that way, patience is a recognition of one of Paul's other themes: that we, each, are differently skilled and gifted.

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As wonderful as *convenience* can be, patience is a threatened skill in our modern, drive-thru obsessed, instant gratification world.

And so, patience takes effort and needs to be nurtured and practiced to become more a part of who we are and can be!

A wise ministry colleague of mine used to say (and practice): "there are few things in life that can't wait for at least a few minutes."

But patience is more than pausing.

Patience creates time for things to change.

Patience gives us time to learn and evolve.

Patience is the virtue that allows us to wait for goodness to emerge.

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Patience is the virtue that allows us to **work** for goodness to emerge.

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A few decades after Paul, another new testament letter-writer penned words to encourage patience: “*Understand this, my beloved: let everyone be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger.*” (James 1:19)

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I know that I am better at patience *now* than I used to be. And yet, I admit that I still have work to do.

But... I am progressing on my journey.

I am striving for the greater gifts.

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The more excellent way is to embrace the greatness of the gift of selfless love. And to ease ourselves in that direction.

Paul encourages us to limit our arrogance and rudeness: to hold back our resentfulness and our reluctance to compromise.

Avoiding these will face us the right direction on the agapé path. But it is patience and kindness they will move us forward.

It will feel right. We can trust our senses to know if it's for real.

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Patience and kindness will bring people together. It will combat the loneliness that so often accompanies arrogance and selfishness.

The resulting agapé will not only bring us closer together, it will bring us closer to God.

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Love is ... heaven to the lonely!

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Let us pray:

God of Love, we pray for hearts open to a Jesus-like compassion. May our lives be renewed to serve you with faithful hearts. Amen.

offering