

PURSUIT OF A LOVER

**A Sermon by the Rev. Dr. Arthur M. Suggs
Preached on the Second Sunday of Advent, December 7, 2014**

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Love Has Many Words in Many Languages

What do you preach on the day of your mother's funeral? Thinking about it, I decided to preach on the topic of love. The sermon may not be very well organized, but it's the best I was able to come up with in the time I had. Here are some thoughts on love that I would like to share with you.

From the Greek in the New Testament, we've got three words for love – eros, philos, and agape. Most of you know these words: Eros, as in erotic love; philos, the friendship kind of love, as in Philadelphia; and agape, as in deep spiritual love. Unfortunately, many people have the notion that one is base, one is sort of medium, and one is high and powerful, but that's not really the case. It's more like three windows opening onto one entity that goes by the word "love." Although we call it love, it's rather more like three different vantage points, three different facets of this one concept.

The Hebrews did a better job with the notion of the single thought that we call love. They have the word "hesed," which is difficult to translate directly into English, but it usually comes out in the sense of "steadfast love." You see it perhaps a thousand times in the Psalms alone. "The steadfast love of the Lord endures forever." If you take love, add a covenant; add promise, determination, stick-to-it-ive-ness; then add our normal notion of love, and you have the Hebrew notion of hesed.

The Singular Concept of Love Is Wholly Inadequate

What hesed says is that the steadfast love of the Lord is yours forever, notwithstanding that it's a redundancy. This word already means that kind of love endures forever. In our minds, this is a generalization. There are a thousand exceptions, but nevertheless it's a generalization. When we think of pure love, we often think of the Madonna and child, the parent/child relationship – that metaphor of God the Father, who loves Christ the Child and by extension loves you and me because we too are children of God. You have a parental notion in this description, which is fine.

In my thinking, however, such a description is flippant and wholly inadequate. So what I would like to do this morning is to add something to it, and that is the idea of romance. The love between bride and groom, between lovers. The love that is the context for making a baby.

This brings me back to an old memory. Thirty years ago, I had just graduated from seminary. Tracy and I had moved to scenic Mount Clemens, Michigan, a bedroom community of Detroit, and there was my very first pastoral job, as an intern in a large, powerful church. My responsibility was basically to be an associate pastor in charge of two large youth groups. This church had a 40-member senior-high group, and as if that weren't enough, it had another 40-member junior-high group. For those 80 kids and their families, as well as their involvement in the church and their programmatic life – all of that stuff – I was the staff person.

Keeping Watch over the Teen-Age Community

Now, about that senior-high youth group, it is safe to say it was awash in hormones. It was a tremendous responsibility. The mix of boys and girls in that group kept you on your toes, but my memory is greatest of two sisters in particular. They were one year apart in age, and in our present-day language, they would be considered completely hot. In the language of a few years ago, they were total babes, and they caught the eye of virtually every boy in the group. However, the younger sister really attracted a particular boy, and the older sister really caught the eye of another boy. That's what Tracy and I had to watch with an eagle eye.

One dynamic that disturbed us was that the younger sister seemed to take advantage of the guy who was interested in her, sort of used him a bit. One day it happened that Tracy and I were driving to church, and we decided to pick up this boy to give him a lift to the group meeting. And so we suddenly had an opportunity to explore a private moment in the car with him. Tracy was riding shotgun; the teenage boy was in the back seat. Tracy turned around and in her very delicate, inimitable style, she said, "You know, we have observed that this girl is sort of taking advantage of you, perhaps using you a little. Have you felt that?"

Tracy and I laugh to this day at the response from that youngster. He threw up his arms, and said, "Use me! Abuse me! I don't care!" He was deeply smitten.

A Single-Minded Suitor on a Quest . . .

I tell you this story because it illustrates the difference between that relationship and that of the elder daughter and her suitor. I have never seen a more single-minded pursuit of a mate in my life than that of this young man. This was not fun and games for him. He was on a quest. He was on a mission. He was not to be deterred. He was going to have his prize come hell or high water. His attitude was that it was going to happen. This was not funny for him. He was going to get her. And so we watched that situation carefully.

Tracy and I were there for twelve months. Then we then moved to Pennsylvania, where I was to take a new ministerial job. A couple years later, we went back to Mount Clemens for a visit, and we learned, sure enough, that the couple had married during the previous summer. He had gotten his prize, which surprised no one.

. . . Cannot Be Denied if Pursued in Heart, Mind, and Soul

Those events taught me how a single-minded pursuit often cannot be deterred. It reminded me, of all things, about Curly in the movie “City Slickers,” as played by Jack Palance. Toward the end of the movie, Curly held up a finger and said, “One thing” to the three city-slickers, who were rather clueless about life and who had their problems. They of course thought, “Well, what is the one thing?” They didn’t know. But in the balance of the movie, they sort of figure it out. It’s that, in choosing your one thing, a person should make sure it is the one thing that will be pursued with all your heart and mind and soul.

Remember the conversation with Martha and Mary that Jesus had? Mary is sitting there at the feet of the master teacher, listening along with the guys, and Martha is doing kitchen chores. She’s upset about it. Jesus doesn’t support her but instead sort of criticizes her, saying, “Martha, Martha, you’re anxious.” The issue, the *mis*-interpretation of it, is that Martha should have chosen to be alongside Mary at the feet of Jesus.

But no, that’s not really the case. Instead, the criticism is that Martha had made her choice, but she wasn’t happy with it. She was dissatisfied, she was anxious about it. She had made the choice of hospitality, but it bothered her. The point, then, is to make a different choice if you’re not happy with the one you made. The one thing that Curly told the city slickers to follow.

This brings up an interesting thought experiment. What would have happened if Martha and Mary had both been sitting there at Jesus’ feet, listening to spiritual talk, and then one of the guys gets hungry? “Isn’t there something to eat around here?” And Martha pipes up, “Probably so. Check the refrigerator and see what you can find.”

In Choosing One Goal, Do not Be Distracted

But the point of that young man pursuing his love, the point that Curly made, is to choose that one thing. Pursue it. Follow it. Do it. If it’s serving, great, do it. Do it single-mindedly. Do it with your whole heart. If it’s sitting at the feet of a spiritual master, fine. If it’s distributing food to somebody in Room 80, that’s fine too. If it’s running your business or pursuing your studies, all those are good plans. But don’t be distracted. Don’t fracture your heart.

One thing I would suggest, having been raised in a blessed way, having been raised with unconditional love that I never doubted, is that it should be the birthright of every kid. In that context, I would say we need to pursue our love, our lover, our beloved, however we envision it. That boy was the most dedicated kid I’ve ever known.

I have also known single-minded pursuits. I have seen it multiple times, maybe not to that extreme, and I have done it myself. I recommend it. The “Song of Songs” in the Bible, that marvelous text, is about the love between a prince and a princess. It’s a fairy tale, through and

through, but it's the fairy tale that touches each of us in our idea of royalty. It is about the love between them, standing for the love that encompasses our world, God and us and our world.

The Pursuit Is Symbolic of God's Relationship with Us

It is the story of the prophet Hosea, who was told by God to find this woman and marry her, a woman by the name of Gomer, except that she doesn't have the same thing in her heart that he does. And so she marries him, but then she leaves. He finds her and brings her back. And then she leaves again and she's at home for a while. Things seem to be okay. But she leaves yet again, and he brings her back yet again. This is symbolic of God's relationship with us.

We tend to be aloof. We sometimes tend to be hard to get. Remember Scarlet in "Gone with the Wind"? Her lover, who had been pursuing her doggedly, finally gives up, doesn't care anymore. When you arrive at the pearly gates, the first words God doesn't want to hear are "Frankly, my dear."

Whether it's God as lover or God philosophically as love, or in terms of our personal piety as the beloved, no matter. It's one thing, one thing that's worthy of our undivided attention.

Then that single-mindedness can flow out into the balance of our lives.

Amen.