

Proper 18, Year

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The Secret Word is Love

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Today's secret word is Love. I say it's secret because at least in the first reading from Ezekial in the Gospel, the topic seems to be more about correcting bad behavior. Love doesn't get mentioned out loud.

Anybody ever see *Godspel* – where Mary of Magdala does this kind of Burlesque act singing *Turn Back Oh Man, Foreswear thy foolish ways*. She's quoting Ezekial.

And Ezekial saying something about God's mercy – the wickedness of the people was killing them. God didn't want that. So you've got God's best interest in mind, best speak up and tell them to turn.

My dearly departed friend Taylor Anderson used to say God's Judgment is God's Mercy. If God is telling you to turn, rather than bringing on the divine consequences, then there is mercy in that reproach, that direction. There is life on the other side of the correction.

That's love.

Then in Matthew Jesus gives this expansive example of what to do when someone in the community is hurts you, sins against you. Jesus' uses the same language as he does when talking about a shepherd finding lost sheep – search them out, point out the fault, ask them to turn. Get help if you need to.

If it all fails treat them like a Gentile or a tax collector. What did Jesus treat Gentiles and tax collectors? He ate with them. Included them. Called them to transformation and forgave them if they were doing harm. He loved them.

When two or more are gathered in Jesus' name he is there among them. That's another way of saying that love is there among them.

What looks like a secret word, Paul makes more clear today in his letter to the Romans.

“Owe no one anything, except to love one another; for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law. The commandments.. are summed up in this word, “Love your neighbor as yourself.” Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law.”

That makes things easy. Or does it? What do the biblical authors mean by love, exactly?

I read an extensive passage on love in *The Oxford Encyclopedia of the Bible* to answer that question. In conclusion it “ The Bible offers no complete or satisfactory presentation of the profound human phenomenon and experience of love. Nor does it articulate a complete theology and/or Christology based upon love.”

And I thought, hmm, I wonder if the author ever met our Presiding Bishop Michael Curry, who every time I've heard him preach – and it's always a delight – has preached a sermon on love. That's all he talks about. He sees it everywhere, especially in the Scriptures. You might remember his sermon at the royal wedding of Prince Harry and Meghan Markle. He preached on love. He preached about love at Bishop Frank Griswold's funeral. He preached on love at the It's All About Love Conference I attended – which also makes sense.

And while he didn't write the book of love, Presiding Bishop Curry wrote a book on love that our LIFT Group read: called *Love is the Way*.

So I figured I'd let him finish this sermon on love by reading you an excerpt from that book. And while we listen to his words, I want you remember him in prayer because he has been facing serious health issues and is up for surgery for internal bleeding. He's finishing his term as presiding bishop next year. But I don't want to lose him from our world anytime soon.

So let's let Presiding Bishop Curry get us started with his recollections of Josie Robbins, whom he said is "what love looks like."

IN MY OWN life, love has had so many, many faces, but among the boldest is the face of Josie Robbins. Josie, who's eighty-five years old as I write this and still in my life, was one of the people who took care of me and my sister when my mother passed away after a long illness. When my father first asked her to help take care of us during Mommy's illness and after, she wasn't a longtime family friend. She was just a lady who stopped by his church some Sundays to drop off her neighbor's child before going to her own Baptist church. But she heard about our family's situation and asked, "How can I help?"

Soon thereafter my father nervously welcomed her into our house and led her to the spare bedroom, where both twin beds were covered with clothes that my father had managed to wash but not iron. Josie had never been in our house, hadn't met the children who wore most of those clothes, but she ironed every single garment with love. A little later my father called: He was running late, could she give his kids lunch? We, who had been instructed to play upstairs and not bother Ms. Robbins, came running down to meet the woman who would eventually be a surrogate mother to us. I can't remember the day, but she says that after lunch, I pulled up a chair next to her ironing board and didn't stop talking until the moment she finished and left.

Moved by love, Josie jumped in with both arms and never let go. She would take me and my sister on the bus to the W.T. Grant store in downtown Buffalo so that we could head straight for the parakeets and hamsters, like we had done with Mommy. She made the hurt go away. She was the only person my tender-headed sister ever let wash and braid her hair, because no one else in this world was so patient and careful not to pull. She had dinner with us so many nights, and over the years was present at all our family events and big days—from my high school, college, and seminary graduations, to weddings, ordinations, births and baptisms, and on and on and on.

Josie Robbins is what love looks like. It's important that we define the word love here with clarity, because these days we use the word to mean so many things... Those are nice, but they're not what I have in mind when I say that love is the only thing that can save the planet.

...Love is a firm commitment to act for the well-being of someone other than yourself. It can be personal or political, individual or communal, intimate or public. Love will not be segregated to the private, personal precincts of life.

Love, as I read it in the Bible, is ubiquitous. It affects all aspects of life.

What I didn't know as a kid was that Josie Robbins's love, shared so generously with my family, had changed many other lives as well. Josie was a principal at St. Augustine's School, a high school for pregnant and parenting teens. She had walked in thinking that it was a summer position—and never left.

In the 1960s, when girls got pregnant in Buffalo, like most other places, they weren't allowed to stay in school. But Josie and St. Augustine's, ... picked them back up. They gave them the chance at a better future for themselves and their children. Because of Josie, thousands of girls got their diplomas and the pride of walking the stage to graduate with their class. The school is now closed-partly because Josie retired, but also because Josie and others advocated until the day the public schools stopped punishing those mothers who were still children themselves, so they could get their education and keep their dignity.

An oft-quoted passage in the New Testament says, "God so loved the world that he gave his only son." The Greek word used by the New Testament writer for the word love is *agape*. And the Greek word used for world is *kosmos*, but what it really means is "everything"- "everything that is." *Kosmos* is what the spiritual is talking about when it says of God, "He's got the whole world in his hands."

God so loved the world that he gave. God gave. God did not take. God gave. That's *apape*. That's love. And love such as that is the way to the heart of God, the heart of each other. It is the way to a new world that looks something more like God's dream for us and all creation, what Dante spoke of as ' the love that moves the sun and stars."

I'll stop there. Of course There's more to the book – Bishop Curry addresses all sorts of questions about love. But I think his story about Josie sums it up – love stops by and ends up staying all the way through to the end. Maybe you've known someone like that or been someone like that. That is doable, liveable love.

Bishop Curry's words are really just the start of today's sermon on love. Because after the preaching of it is done, we'll continue with the living of it. In our prayers and our own feast around the table. And this afternoon we'll love on our neighbors and on each other at our Community Rally Day.

Throughout the day today, Listen to what the sermon that is your life today is saying to you. Love is after all today's secret world.

Amen