

“What Language Are You Speaking?”

August 14, 2022

God’s Good Gift of Sexuality series

I studied languages in college - a Spanish major and a German minor. The two are not closely related; Spanish is a romance language, and German is Germanic and more closely related to English in structure. Even though I studied, read, and wrote in both Spanish and German, I’m most comfortable with English as my native language. If you ask me to converse with someone in Spanish or German, it would be a challenge.

Some of you know that Ivan, my spouse, is a native speaker of Serbo-Croatian, a Slavic language. He is fluent in English, and there are times when I’m amazed at how easily he can go from one to the other with no problem. Still with his family, it’s most comfortable to speak in Serbo-Croatian.

I love to hear languages and can usually figure out a good guess at what language someone is speaking. Languages have always been interesting to me, and even when we get into regional dialects and accents, it’s clear that we don’t speak the same language. I use closed captioning a lot to make sure I understand what someone is saying.

It was after I started in pastoral ministry that I came across love languages. Dr. Gary Chapman’s work in emotional love languages has proven to be a great help to me in my own life - and in my work with people. We don’t always “speak” the same love language as the people closest to us, and when I figured that out, it was an “a-ha” moment. Though we all use the word “love,” we don’t all experience love in the same way. Chapman offers us five emotional love languages (words of affirmation - written or spoken, quality time, receiving gifts (though it can also be about giving gifts), acts of service, and physical touch - not just intimate touch) as a way to understand how God loves us and how we love one another. And it’s not that we only speak one love language, but usually there are one or two love languages that are primary for us. You can probably guess your primary love language.

The best example I have of the differences in love languages is what I learned about myself and Ivan. Ivan is good at gift giving. He likes to find the right gift - something special - for family and friends. He takes time and is thoughtful about it. He wraps gifts well. And he likes to receive gifts - not because he just likes stuff, but because he appreciates the love of the giver.

Gifts is not my primary love language at all. I'd rather give a gift card. I hate wrapping things and would rather find a gift bag. So, when I figured out that Ivan cares more about giving and receiving gifts than me, I realized I needed to pay closer attention. My crowning achievement was when I thought of something specific to give him that he hadn't thought of himself or put on a list - a tea box. It's a work in progress, but it was an important moment of understanding and honoring our differences.

We're called to be connected – to God and each other. That doesn't look the same for every person, and that's true for love languages. Some of us are married; some not. Some have a large group of friends; some keep a close few. Regardless of what it looks like for us, connection is important. As we heard last week, we're not meant to be alone - whatever that looks like for us; connection that is life-giving, life-honoring, and life-affirming is vital.

And love languages apply to all of us. Chapman's tool is for everyone - no matter our age or relationship status. I've realized how important it is to know what love language my children and family members speak. One of my kids needs a lot of hugs; one does not. One of my family members needs more affirmation while another loves to spend time together.

We tend to show love to others in the same way we most like to experience love, but that may not be received or understood as well as we think it might. Think about a language you don't speak - you may not be able to understand what's someone is saying, even if it's lovely.

The same is true for love languages - it works better if we understand love languages. Pastor Adam Hamilton says we tend to follow the Golden Rule - *Do unto others as you'd have them do unto you* - but in the case of love languages, we have to take time to understand and *do unto others as they would have us do unto them*.

SLIDE: Tillich quote: *The first duty of love is to listen*. I wonder if Fred Rogers read some Paul Tillich and was influenced by that sense of meeting people where they are. Rogers said, "Love isn't a state of perfect caring. It is an active noun like struggle. To love someone is to strive to accept that person exactly the way he or she is [they are], right here and now."

When we talk about love languages, we're talking about understanding others well and responding to them in ways that connect. We can't and shouldn't assume that others respond like we do. So, we have to ask what's helpful and meaningful -

and we have to listen.

SLIDE: Love Languages (taco)

We use the word *love* a lot. English just has one word for “love,” even though we know that my love for coffee is different than my love for my spouse or children. Both Hebrew and Greek have multiple words for love ranging from romantic, intimate love to love for family or friends. Love is given and received in return.

Last week, we looked at the account of creation and the word *ezer/edzer* - helper - and the understanding of how we’re called to be helpers to one another. If we take that into our relationships, we can see how it can help us to care for each other better. Understanding how give and receive love is a part of that.

Agape is a New Testament understanding of love - rooted in Jesus’ loving sacrifice for the world. And if we seek to follow him, then we’re called to *agape* love. That doesn’t mean that physical or emotional connections are off the table, but ultimately, our relationships should reflect *agape* - sacrificial love.

Here in Corinthians, *agape* is the word used when we hear “love.” *Agape* love seeks goodwill for another...promotes another’s well-being...sacrifices for the sake of others. *Agape* has more to do with attitude and action – not so much with emotion and feeling. *Agape* love gives – receiving nothing in return – or at least not expecting a return.

Agape love doesn’t look for a reward. *Agape* is cultivated in us when we consider Jesus’ love for us. *Agape* shows in acts of care, support, and justice. Dr. Cornel West says, “Justice is what love looks like in public, just like tenderness is what love feels like in private.”

Some of us hear First Corinthians 13 and think of a wedding - maybe even our own. It’s the hope we have for relationships - that people would embody that *agape* love with each other: patience, kindness, and so on. If we’re honest, it doesn’t take long for this to be challenging, though we’re not thinking about that so much on a wedding day.

Now when I hear that passage, I think about make people who have modeled patience and kindness in their relationships - the times it’s been given to me, and the challenge of offering it. The video we shared showed the depth of love that grows as we grow together. That matters in a relationship with a spouse or significant other or whether we’re thinking about all of our relationships.

We strive for *agape* love, but we also know how difficult it is because our human tendency isn’t for self-sacrifice; we’re more into self-satisfaction and self-

serving. We don't always put others first, but if we're talking about sexuality as a good gift of God, those four Cs matter: covenant, commitment, consent, and care. Rachel Held Evans wrote, "when sexuality gets relegated to the realm of religious absolutes, the focus tends to shift from serving one another (which is the goal) to servicing one another. And that's no way to love."

Agape love is never a call to be hurt or abused by others. *Agape* love is grounded in God's love for us - and in our understanding of one another as beloved and created in God's image. Paul tells us what love should be, and he tells us what it shouldn't be - probably as a reaction to some infighting that was happening within the faith community in Corinth. If you read chapter 12, we get Paul's encouragement to them about how each person is important and how their gifts are important to the whole.

And so, Paul responds with this "more excellent way" of relating. Instead of competing about the gifts you have, think about who you are and to whom you belong. If you have spiritual gifts, they don't mean anything without *agape* love as the motivation. That's a powerful statement and challenge for anyone who reads it - whether it's to a couple making a commitment to each other, a parent caring for a child or child caring for a parent, or friends caring for each other. Love is our motivation - our heart's desire - as God's love grows in us. That's a constant challenge as we seek to follow Christ.

So, what will we do to invest in our relationships - to understand our love languages and respond? Today you have a handout - one side has suggestions for how you might care for yourself, and the other has ideas for how to love others. It's especially good to have ideas if you don't speak the same language - chances are you probably don't.

SLIDE: Self-love with Love Languages (use as a handout)

SLIDE: Loving others with Love Languages (use as a handout)

God's story and ours begins and ends with love. Creation is an act of love. May love be our first and last thought. May love be our grounding and our guide - *agape* love rooted in Christ's love for us. May we see love for the gift that it is for us and for the world God loves.

Let us pray...