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## *How Do I Love Thee?*

**An article for the *Cathedral Times* by the Very Rev. Sam Candler**

*How do I love thee? Let me count the ways* (with apologies to Elizabeth Barrett Browning!). During this famous week, we consider love. How do we love? Perhaps it is with the love that Isaac had for Rebekah, the first time a word for romantic love between two adults was used in the Hebrew scriptures: "Isaac loved Rebekah" (Genesis 24:67). The word continued to be used to describe a parent's love for a child: "Isaac loved Esau," and "Rebecca loved Jacob." That word in Hebrew, *ahab* is the word for many sorts of love, from the most intimate to the most ordinary. Yes, Isaac loved Rebekah, but the very same word is used to describe how Isaac loved savory meat! (Genesis 27).

How do I love thee? Maybe it is with *hesed*, steadfast love. After Moses delivered his people from bondage in Egypt, he sang a song praising God for "steadfast love" (Exodus 15). That phrase, "steadfast love" is the translation of the Hebrew, *hesed*, which will become known as a special kind of love: divine love.

The first time love appears as a commandment is later, in the third book of the Bible, the Book of Leviticus, when the Hebrews are commanded to love their *neighbor*. "You shall love your neighbor as yourself" (Leviticus 19:18).

It is not until the fifth book of the Bible, the Book of Deuteronomy, that Israel hears the great commandment, the Shema: "*Hear, O Israel: The LORD is our God, the LORD alone. You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might*" (Deuteronomy 6:4-5).

Yet, in those famous instances, the word used for love is the word, *ahab*, the earthly, secular, love that is the same word used to say that Isaac loved savory meat. It is not until still later in Hebrew history that we begin to hear the famous word for love, *hesed*, more frequently. *Hesed* is the tender and loyal love that God has for humanity. *Hesed* is a covenantal, loyal, type of love. In fact, it seems to have more connection to loyalty than it does to passion. The psalmist sings, "Thy loving kindness is better than life." (Psalm 63).

We might say, then, that the Hebrews first discovered love in earthy, relationship ways; but later they spoke of a divine love that deserved another word altogether. The love they sensed from God was something a bit different. Still, the words *ahab* and *hesed* are both used to describe God's love. They are not exclusive of each other, and sometimes they seem to be used interchangeably. Something about love was known in both those words. Thus, love danced before the Hebrews in different ways.

The ancient Greeks may have used as many as seven different words to describe the various phenomena of love. We usually reduce that number to four. First, there was certainly *agapé*, divine love, a kind of ideal love that was reserved for the gods. And there was certainly the common *eros*, a romantic and carnal and passionate love, from which, of course, we get the word erotic. There was also *philia*, which describes the love between friends. Fourthly, the Greek word *storgé* referred to love within a family. *Agapé*, *eros*, *philia*, and *storgé*.

Empedocles, writing in the 5<sup>th</sup> century BC, named love as one of two constant forces in the world of nature. Nature consisted of four elements, he wrote, just as many had written: earth, air, fire, water. But those elements were constantly being either drawn together, or forced apart, by one of two cosmic forces. Strife, or *Neikos*, was the force of repulsion and fragmentation. But love, or *Philotes*, was the force of attraction and combination.

Amidst all the various attempts to define love, Socrates (in Plato) makes a most famous claim. He acknowledges that love, by whatever name, is a form of madness! Being in love is the condition of being possessed by a daemon, a spirit. Love is a form of madness, not a malevolent madness, but an exhilarating

one.

Christianity, of course, with Saint Paul, would settle on *agapé* as the pinnacle of love, a kind of divine, self-giving love. Paul would write to the Corinthians the words that we hear so often at weddings: *Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. (1 Corinthians 13).* He is using the word, *agapé*.

How do I love thee? During this famous week, I suggest that all our forms for love are similar, whether we know love in divine or in human ways. In all its forms, love is a matter of self-giving, a giving away of something of ourselves. I pray, this week and every week, that each of us has known love in our lives, that we have known the sheer joy of giving ourselves to another person.

Love does not merely recognize value in another person. It is love that creates value in another person. Love creates value in this world, whether that love is *from* family or friend, or lover or God. Whether that love is *to* family or friend, or lover or God. Love is what creates value in this world.

So, here's to the people we value in the world. Family, friend, spouse, partner, God. We love you! How do I love thee? As Duke Ellington would say (following Plato perhaps), "I love you madly!"

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Sam Candler". The signature is written in black ink and has a long, horizontal flourish extending to the right.

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