

Some different meanings of love

By Tony Pearson

SUDDENLY WE'RE IN MAY. Soon it will be June ? wedding season. That gets me thinking about a gospel passage often quoted in wedding services. It's by St. Paul, in a letter he wrote to the church in Corinth. ?If I speak in the tongues of men or of angels, but do not have love, I am only a clanging cymbal. If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, but do not have love, I am nothing....

?Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It does not dishonor others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres.?

However, most people don't realize what concept of love Paul was discussing. Because in fact, his point doesn't have much to do with what we celebrate at weddings. Paul, as an educated man of his time, wrote in Greek. The Greeks had different words for different types of love, just as the Inuit have different words for different types of snow.

I am humbled to say that I learned about this from a truly great man. In 1961, when I was still in university in Montreal, my friend got hold of two tickets to hear a talk by a man who was just starting to symbolize the civil rights movement: Dr. Martin Luther King junior. My friend and I went to Temple Emmanuel, a Jewish synagogue, to hear Dr. King speak. This was long before the March on Washington and his immortal ?I have a dream? speech. But even before that, the man was spellbinding.

In his talk, he discussed the various meanings of Greek terms for ?love? (the fact that he could discuss ancient Greek and hold his audience enthralled shows his ability as a speaker). There was ?eros?, or romantic/sexual love, which he said he had used a lot when wooing his wife. Then there was ?phileo?, or brotherly love, used in connection with family or neighbourhood, or even a preference. Wine lovers are called oenophiles (or drunks). Those who love all things British are called Anglophiles.

But, Dr. King continued, there was a further, more exalted vision of love, called ?agape?. This referred to the love God had for mankind, or the love that people should have for humanity ? regardless of affinity, regardless of nationality, race, colour, or belief. This ?agape?, Dr. King told us, was what the civil rights movement was striving for ? a love that transcended the petty differences that people use to distinguish themselves from others. Interestingly, in Paul's letter to the Corinthians, when he talks about the necessity and the primacy of love among the virtues, he uses the word ?agape?.

It is this concept of ?agape? that eventually worked its way into the Canadian constitution through Pierre Trudeau's Charter of Rights. Article 15 states it in dry legal language:

?Every individual is equal before and under the law and has the right to the equal protection and equal benefit of the law without discrimination and, in particular, without discrimination based on race, national or ethnic origin, colour, religion, sex, age or mental or physical disability.?

Jesus also used the word ?agape? in the Sermon on the Mount, when he told his listeners to love everyone, even your enemy. ?For if you only love those who love you, what reward have you?? he asked.

What is therefore being advocated in the original Christian gospels is that we must embrace difference. When Jesus said ?Love thy neighbour?, he was asked ?Who is my neighbour?? By way of reply, he gave the parable of the Good Samaritan. At the time, there was a great deal of animosity between orthodox Jews (like Jesus) and their religious adversaries, the Samaritans. Yet in the parable, the ?good guy? is the stranger, the heretic, the opponent of the prevailing beliefs. After recounting the story of the man on the road rescued by someone of a different belief, he asked the people around him: ?Who was the neighbour unto him that fell among the thieves?? When someone answered ?He that showed compassion?, Jesus replied. ?Go, and do thou likewise.?

There are lots of people whom we are asked to condemn ? the refugee, the drug addict, the dissenter, the person of a different faith, the person of a different sexual orientation. But if we do, can we really claim to be Christian?

?Agape? ? a love of humanity, in all its different aspects. That's quite an ideal to strive for. No envy, no disrespect, no self-pride - but rather trust, hope, and protection. I heard Dr. King espouse the idea a long time ago. A few years later, he was assassinated. But hopefully, his ideals did not die with him.