

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,
Kingstowne, Virginia, on Thursday, April 1, 2010
Maundy Thursday**

THE LANGUAGE OF LOVE

John 12:1-8

Everybody has a “love language.” Each of us has a primary way of both expressing love and receiving or perceiving love. What makes it complicated is that, because we’re not all wired the same way, we don’t all speak or understand the same love language. And it is not unusual to speak more than one love language.

Marriage counselor Gary Chapman has identified the five main love languages that people speak. Many of you are probably familiar with these languages. If you’re married or thinking about getting married, it is essential for you to identify your primary love language(s), and the love language(s) of your spouse or potential spouse. I’m not sure I can overestimate the importance of this. I use Chapman’s book, *The Five Love Languages*, in my counseling with couples preparing for marriage. The truth is, it can be helpful in any marriage where husbands and wives either don’t know how to express their love to their spouse, or they just want to do a better job of communicating their love.

In case you’re not familiar with them, the five love languages are:

1. Words of Affirmation: Actions don’t always speak louder than words. Some of us feel most loved when love is expressed verbally. Hearing the words, “I love you,” receiving unsolicited compliments or words of appreciation, mean the world to you if this is your primary love language. Words have tremendous power to communicate love. They also have the power to tear down or destroy. If this is your primary love language, you know what I mean.

2. Quality Time: If this is your primary love language, nothing communicates love to you more than full, undivided attention. You feel most loved when your beloved spends time with you, even if it is just going for a walk or sitting together on the sofa to talk. Some people spell love T-I-M-E.

3. Giving and Receiving Gifts: For some of us, gifts are the primary language of love. Gifts, whether large or small, expensive or not, are visual symbols of love. A gift is a way for the giver to say to the receiver: “I was thinking about you. I value you.” A thoughtful gift communicates to the receiver that he or she is cared for. Prized. Cherished. When we partake of communion this evening, it is a visual symbol of the Savior’s love for us. We receive the bread and the cup as symbols of the sacrifice of Christ’s body on the cross and the shedding of His blood for us. It is God’s way of saying to us: “This is how much I love you.”

4. Acts of Service: For some of us, actions *do* speak louder than words. We feel most loved not when we hear the words “I love you,” but when love is put into action. In the Broadway play *My Fair Lady*, Eliza Doolittle is being courted by a man named Freddy, who writes her

love letters every day. But that is not Eliza's love language. At one point she cries out in frustration: "Words! Words! I'm so sick of words! If you're in love, show me! Don't talk of love lasting through time. If you love me, show me now!"

Washing the dishes can be an expression of love. Vacuuming the floors can be an expression of love. Taking out the trash can be an expression of love. Anything you do to lighten the load of responsibilities for an "Acts of Service" person will speak volumes and help that person feel loved. For some of us, love is best and most powerfully expressed when it is put into concrete and practical action.

5. Physical Touch: Chapman emphasizes that this isn't all about what happens in the bedroom, though for married couples, it is an important part of it. Holding hands, a hug, a pat on the back, a tender touch on the shoulder or face – all of these can be powerful expressions of loving care, compassion and support to the person who feels most loved through physical touch. Some of us don't like to be hugged or to give hugs. We're just wired that way. But some of us long to be hugged, because it is the language of love we speak and understand.

If you're married or in a relationship with someone, if you're a parent and you want to make sure your children know they are loved, you need to know the love language(s) that best communicates love to you. But even more, you need to know the love language(s) of your spouse or children, so that you can express your love for them in ways that will make them feel most loved.

THE ANOINTING OF JESUS WITH PERFUME

It is not hard to figure out what Mary's main love languages were. The Mary I'm referring to was the sister of Martha and Lazarus. Two Sundays ago, we looked at the differences between Martha and Mary. When you look at them through the prism of these five love languages, it is obvious that Martha's primary language was acts of service. Serving was her main way of showing – and presumably receiving – love.

Mary was different. She wasn't wired the same way as her sister. Mary's two primary love languages were quality time and giving (or receiving) gifts. While Martha showed her love for Jesus by going all out to serve Him with a special dinner (Luke 10:38-42), Mary wanted nothing more than just to be with Jesus. She showed her love and devotion to Jesus by sitting at His feet and listening to His teaching. But that isn't all.

In our text this evening from John 12, the clock is ticking. It is the day before Jesus would make His entrance into Jerusalem to the Hosannas and applause of the crowds. His crucifixion is less than a week away. Time is winding down.

Mary seemed to understand better than anyone – better than Peter, James and John, and the rest of the disciples – that Jesus was about to die. She was more spiritually discerning than any of them. She understood what was about to happen because she had sat at the feet of Jesus and taken His teaching to heart. She got it. And she decided to do something to express

her love and devotion to Jesus. She did it by giving Him a gift. An unexpected gift. An extravagant gift.

Jesus was in Bethany, where Mary, Martha and Lazarus lived. A dinner was being given in His honor. Though John leaves this detail out, Matthew and Mark indicate that the dinner was held at the house of a man known as Simon the leper (see Matthew 26:6-13 and Mark 14:3-9). Most likely, Simon was a man Jesus had healed of his leprosy.

While Jesus and the rest of the guests were reclining at the table, Mary created a stir by breaking an expensive jar of perfume and pouring it on Jesus' feet. In those days, people didn't sit at the table to eat, the way we do, with our feet under the table. They reclined on sofas with their heads near the table and their feet away from the table. They would lean on a cushion with one arm and eat with the other. So, with Jesus reclining at the table, His feet were easily accessible to Mary.

She broke open the bottle of perfume and poured it all out. It was probably about twelve ounces, which is a lot of perfume. It was worth about a year's wages. That is an expensive gift. Think about how much it would cost if you or I (or the average worker in northern Virginia) were to give a love offering to God worth a whole year's income. We're talking about a lot of money, aren't we? That bottle of perfume was probably the most valuable thing Mary owned. You can be sure she didn't pour it out on the spur of the moment. She had thought about it and prayed about it. It was a premeditated act of love.

After pouring out the perfume on Jesus' feet, she let her hair down (not something a woman would ordinarily do in public) and wiped the feet of Jesus with her long hair as an act of love and devotion.

The Bible indicates that Jesus understood Mary's gift and received it as a love offering from her heart. But not everybody understood. Not everybody approved. In fact, Mary was on the receiving end of some pointed criticism. Mark doesn't identify the critics of Mary beyond saying that "some of those present" were indignant about the whole thing (Mark 14:4-5). Matthew says it was the disciples of Jesus who were outraged by it (Matthew 26:8-9). But John gets more specific and says it was Judas Iscariot, the disciple who would soon betray Jesus and hand Him over to the Jewish leaders, who led the chorus of critics who condemned Mary's extravagance (John 12:4-5). Judas thought it was a terrible waste of a precious commodity. If Mary wanted to do something sacrificial, he thought, she could have sold the perfume and given the money to the poor.

It sounds awfully pious, doesn't it? But those pious words only masked the duplicity in Judas' heart. He didn't really care about the poor one way or the other. What he cared about was padding his own pockets, and he used his position as the treasurer for the twelve disciples to do just that. His underlying motive was anything but virtuous.

But we have to admit that there are a lot of people who would agree with Judas and the others in their criticism of Mary, probably including some of us. Some people are innately critical of anything that appears to be impractical or extravagant. There is nothing wrong with being

practical. In fact, it is a good thing – a very good thing – if your heart is right. However, if you think your practical nature makes you morally or spiritually superior to someone who, like Mary, is moved to do something lavish for God’s glory, you’re wrong. It just isn’t so.

And, as Jesus recognized, there was a practical aspect – an immensely practical aspect – to Mary’s sacrificial act. She did it, knowing His death was on the horizon, to prepare His body for burial (John 12:7; Matthew 26:23; Mark 14:8).

The Bible says there is a time for everything (Ecclesiastes 3:1). There is a time to be practical, to be sure. But this was a time to be extravagant in showing love. Jesus wasn’t going to be with them much longer.

Mary wanted to do something beautiful for her Savior. And Jesus said that the beauty of her act would not be forgotten, but would be told wherever the gospel is preached throughout the world, in memory of her (Matthew 26:13; Mark 14:9). So we remember Mary and the language of her love tonight.

But this service tonight, this special night of remembrance in the midst of Holy Week, is not about Mary and the extravagance of her love. It is about Jesus and the extravagance of His love for us.

A LOVE LIKE NO OTHER

Jesus spoke all five of Gary Chapman’s love languages. He spoke to people wherever He went about God’s love for them. He showed His love for people by spending time with them, as a way of saying, “You matter to me.” He understood the power of touch. Whether it was with children or people dealing with diseases of all kinds, Jesus used the power of touch to bring healing and to communicate His love. He demonstrated His love through acts of service, from healing the sick to feeding crowds numbering thousands of men, women and children. And He expressed His love for lost sinners like us by giving the ultimate gift, the gift of Himself, the gift of His own life, when He suffered and died for us on a wooden cross with spikes driven through His hands and feet.

Extravagant love? This is it:

He was pierced for our transgressions,
He was crushed for our iniquities;
The punishment that brought us peace was upon Him,
And by His wounds we are healed.
(Isaiah 53:5)

You may know the story of the boy whose sister was diagnosed with the same disease he had had and recovered from two years earlier. His sister needed a blood transfusion from someone who had previously beaten the disease. Since both brother and sister had the same rare blood type, he was the ideal donor.

When the doctor asked if he would give his blood to his sister, the boy hesitated. His lower lip began to tremble. Then he said: “Since it’s for my sister, I’ll do it.”

So the nurse inserted the needle into his arm, and he watched as the blood flowed through the tube. When it was almost over, the boy said: “Doctor, when am I going to die?” At that point the doctor realized why the boy had hesitated, why his lip had trembled when the doctor asked him to donate his blood. He thought giving his blood to his sister meant giving up his life. In that moment, he had made a life-and-death decision. It was an act of love for his sister.

This boy, of course, didn’t die when he donated blood to his sister. He didn’t have to die to help save her life. Every one of us, though, has a condition more serious, more deadly, than the sister’s. And it required Jesus to give not just a unit of blood, but His life. All of it.

The Masters’ golf tournament is next week in Augusta, Georgia, where it is played every year. I keep hearing promotional spots on TV saying that The Masters’ has “a tradition unlike any other.” That may be so, as far as golf championships go. I love The Masters’. But there is no comparison between the tradition of The Masters’ and the extravagant, sacrificial love of Jesus. His love for us – God’s love for us – is a love like no other. And we see it most clearly in the suffering and death of Jesus on the cross, His Good Friday offering of Himself as the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world.

Dear friends, whatever your love language may be, never, ever forget the language of Jesus’ love for you and me – for a world of sinners who are lost without Him. And, like Mary, find ways to show your love for Him.

Love so amazing, so divine,
Demands my soul, my life, my all.
– Isaac Watts

Lord, let it be so in us, tonight and always. Amen.