

Let us pray...O Lord, open our hearts to hear Your Word and guide us in sharing this Good News! In Your name we ask, Amen. (Please be seated)

Good morning, and Welcome

Borrowing from a popular marketing technique (and for some of us reminiscent of a popular commercial)...

Fact – in the United States in 1961:

price of a gallon of whole milk...49 cents

average cost of a movie ticket...73 cents

minimum wage...\$1.00

The love of a young couple ... priceless!

Today's scripture readings may seem somewhat disconnected, but if we look closely, what we really have here is a golden thread weaving through the readings binding them together with love.

So, let's take a few minutes to walk through a high-level overview...starting with our Old Testament reading from Daniel (12:1-13). Our special "cliff notes" version tells us it's about the metaphor of the birthing process, that is the birth pangs that leads us through pain to great joy. It's also a reminder that we have the love of God experienced through Jesus' loving sacrifice and resurrection, that brings us to the joy of rebirth...the new life in Christ – and our place in God's eternal kingdom. Yes, God's love is priceless!

Now we turn to the special Canticle from today, that is – A Song of God's Love which is based on 1 John 4: 7- 11. In studying this scripture, one perspective shared by Pastor Scott Childs reveals at least 3 "love" concepts. First is that **God has enabled us to love**...we have the Love Chromosome, so to speak – as humans in God's image, we are wired to love although some of us may have a harder time realizing that than others, but for most of us, "Love enabled" is in our DNA...

The second love concept is that **God's love is unconditional**. Remember back in September, we spoke about the Agape kind of love and explored where the context for this ultimate love is the epitome of a selfless act - the kind of love we

see from Jesus' sacrifice for us on the Cross and knowing and understanding that God's unconditional love comes from the sacrificial love of Jesus the Messiah. It's offered without ego or the thought of reciprocity.

And a third love concept is that **God's love requires us to love one another as God has loved us.** We read in the Canticle [*slide with canticle words*]

A Song of God's Love
1 John 4:7-11
...*"Beloved, since God loved us so much, *
we ought also to love one another.
For if we love one another, God abides in us, *
and God's love will be perfected in us."...*

*"Beloved, since God loved us so much, * we ought also to love one another. For if we love one another, God abides in us, * and God's love will be perfected in us."*
As followers of Jesus, we understand our Christian duty *"to love your neighbor as yourself"*.

Being hard-wired for love, living in an Agape style of love and being open to recognizing and embracing ALL God's children, yes, this Canticle helps brings us to the next level of joy. Yes, God's love is priceless! [*take slide down*]

As we continue to follow the fabric of love, Paul's letter to the Corinthians provides a simple and elegant way to help us know what love is all about when he writes that *"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" {...}*"And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love".

As we finish this tapestry of love with our scriptures today, even in Mark's Gospel we hear Jesus talk with the Peter, James, John, and Andrew that though there will be a time when the stones will tumble and fall, the salvation promised is achieved through the Gospel – through the Good News - and with that we enter everlasting love and sacredness. As one theologian has written, *"We are called to be open and to listen for God to come."* He continues that *"in and through the worst that happens, God is still active --- "if not in it and through it then in spite of it. Or*

...that in fact, no matter what...as long as we always keep our eyes fixed on Jesus, then we will not be distracted or misled by others who would claim to be him."

Yes, there it is...It's that holy listening, it's that having the faith, that no matter what challenges we face we can feel God's love embrace. We know that by living into our Baptismal Covenant with Agape kind of love...the selflessness and loving our neighbors as ourselves show who we are. And we are reminded that it is our actions that manifest this love! Yes, God's love is priceless!

As we spend time with these scripture readings today, we can see a parallel to relationships and specifically today, to a relationship that spans 6 decades. We are privileged to honor Jill and Jeff Leatherman as they have achieved the marital status of rarefied air – 60 years! *[Show wedding picture]*



All relationships have periods of joy, instances of challenges, flashes of humor, and moments of brilliant and unconditional love. Respecting and acknowledging the gifts each other brings to the relationship supports living in faith and hope. Recognizing this cycle of life and love, allows us to celebrate the act of weaving that golden thread into the colorful and life-giving tapestry of love. *[take down pic]*

Wow, 60 years...not only the love within the relationship but the environment in which it thrives and survives continues to evolve and change over 60 years – just consider phones and travel – yet the love endures. It is only appropriate then that the symbol of 60 years of marriage is the Diamond! While the mining of diamonds has far-reaching concerns and implications, yet, when we focus just on the symbolism of the gemstone itself, we can imagine what it represents. The word diamond finds its roots in Greek language where it was translated from “adamas” meaning unconquerable and indestructible. Think about it, a marriage lasting 60 years must be indestructible as the relationship has managed to withstand challenges and pain through its journey experiencing joy and love.

While the diamond is the hardest of gemstones, it is also the simplest in its form as it is composed of 1 element – just carbon.

Writer, Ilana Brandwein in her 2019 article on *The Spiritual Meaning of Diamonds: Power in Perfection...* details the characteristics of the Diamond – that it is seen as a symbol of faithfulness, love, purity, and relationships filled with love.

Author Brandwein writes, “...diamonds also hold deeper spiritual meanings thanks to their rarity, purity, and brilliance. Formed over billions of years and composed of pure carbon – the foundation of all life in the world around us – diamonds have also been used over the centuries to help open the mind to the new and {the}possible. Believing the illumination and reflection of a diamond will inspire imagination and ingenuity in its wearer, they also bring about strength, fortitude and courage through a diamond’s hardness and ‘invincibility’ having the power to drive away bad energy or fortune”.

Thanks to writer Brandwein’s spiritual symbolism of a diamond, she’s painted a picture for us of a love relationship. This brief diamond overview seems to sum up relationships in marriages and even our relationship with God, yes... can you hear it? using our Holy Listening, ...we can find our own “Parable of the Diamond”. The story and symbolism of the Diamond can be a metaphor for our relationship with God. Through our actions we too, can demonstrate faithfulness, love, purity, while opening our hearts, our minds, our souls to the love of God and in following the Way of Jesus.

In any relationship...be that marriages or spiritual, listening and sharing is the communication that must be present for lasting bond - It’s about that connection of love, faith and hope that allows us to withstand assaults upon our being, and when we stand together, upon our relationship. It does not mean we won’t have doubts, even clergy, being human, at times have doubts. Through prayer, scripture, and for us -our Episcopal tradition- we know that we can question, we can search, and as long as we have the communication...have open hearts...use our holy listening...we can hold on to our faith.

This morning, our St. James' family will be participating in Jill and Jeff's Vow renewal celebration along with their family and friends. We hold and embrace them as they have continued to share their Agape love... their unselfish love by all they have done for each other and for those in community. Jeff and Jill's actions authentically manifest the *Love Concept*.

They have been role models by advocating for our indigenous people, raising up leaders and developing women providing tools to be self-sufficient, sharing of their time and talents through creative expressions of online auctions, nights of music, cookbooks, and outreach just to name a few. Inspiration comes in many forms and the Vow Renewal grounded in 60 years of love, faith, hope, and trust, is an outward and visible sign for all of us following the Way of Jesus.

A tribute to this love will be heard today during the offertory special music the choir will sing. So, let us open our hearts to the words of the Shaker hymn and listen for the verses as our brilliant musicians sing:

Tis a gift to be simple, 'tis the gift to be free,
'Tis a gift to come down where we ought to be,
And when we find ourselves in the place just right,
'Twill be in the valley of love and delight.

**Tis a gift to be loving, tis a gift to be kind, tis a gift to leave our bitterness behind
And when we find ourselves in the place just right,
'Twill be in the valley of love and delight.**

In closing, let's return to our fact checking in the United States over these last 60 years – where are we today...:

Price of a gallon of whole milk ... \$3.69

Average cost of a movie ticket... \$9.16

Minimum wage in AZ... \$12.15

The love of a young couple through 60 years ...still priceless and brilliant as a diamond! *[Picture of Jeff/Jill today]*



And so, Jill and Jeff, thank you for letting us share in celebrating and learning from your fortitude and your loving relationship as you remind us that it is the gift to be simple, it is the gift of hope, it is the gift of faith, and it is the gift of love with each other and with God...which is...priceless!

Amen.
