

Let's talk about kjaerlighet

BY DAVID POSEY

Chit pa de, Jeg elsker dig, qabang. That's "I love you" in three languages: Burmese, Danish and... Klingon (is that a language?). The word in the title is "love" in Norwegian (pronounced (*shar-lee-et*)).

In Hawaiian, one might say *pumehana*, which means "I feel affection for you," similar to "aloha," but the latter is the more general word, sort of like an affectionate "hello" in English.

In all languages, most of the words for love are about our feelings toward someone else. In the Persian tongue, there is a phrase that, if translated into English, would be "I love you from my liver." We would say, "I love you from the bottom of my heart" but what we are really saying is, "I love you with my guts." (Sorry, but think about what's at the "bottom of your heart.").

If you grew up in the 40-50s, you probably heard a lot preaching and teaching from the King James Version. If so, you heard the word "bowels" on occasion, a word that, to put it mildly, doesn't exactly create a pitter patter in the heart. But the word is used 37 times in the KJV, 11 of those in the New Testament. For example, in Colossians 3:12, Paul says,

Put on therefore, as the elect of God, holy and beloved, bowels of mercies, kindness, humbleness of mind, meekness, longsuffering...

The word is three times in the tiny book of Philemon. Note this:

For we have great joy and consolation in thy love, because the bowels of the saints are refreshed by thee, brother. *Philemon 1:7*

That's a little hard for modern ears to hear. The Greek word is *splankna*, from which we get the word "spleen." We might say, "I love you from my spleen," to get closer to the sense of the Greek word, but I doubt you want to hear that whispered in your ear. *Splankna* is the root word for *splanknizomai* which is translated "with compassion" in all 12 usages in the KJV.

Even then, when moving from the Greek to the English, something is lost in our translation of *splankna*. In the Philemon passage, "hearts" is put for "bowels" in ESV and, while that is more palatable, it is less expressive. Paul was saying "the deepest 'insides' of the brethren were refreshed by you." Even in the Colossians passage, "compassionate hearts" (ESV) doesn't quite get the sense.

Many of you are aware that the New Testament word translated "love" is most often the Greek noun, *agape* or the verb, *agapao*. Because of that, when talking about love, we typically give more attention to *agape*. We do that because we want to clarify that when

Jesus or the apostles talk about “love” it’s not just feelings they are talking about. Love — *agape* — means that we have made a commitment to someone’s welfare, regardless of how we feel about them at any given time.

It’s right to emphasize *agape*, but we may, in the process, shortchange the words that involve our feelings, such as *splankna* and its cognates. Those words deserve our attention as well. Moreover, we should not view the word *agape* as a word devoid of emotion. It’s true that, in most cases, *agape* doesn’t *require* feelings. For example, Jesus tells us to love our enemies and do good to them (Mt. 5:44). Jesus doesn’t mean that we only do good to them when we are “feelin’ it.” But husbands are also told to love (*agapao*) their wives (Eph. 5:25). What a sad marriage it would be if that love is not accompanied by feelings of affection for her!

There are other uses of *agape* that strongly imply a feeling of affection. In Mark 10:21, Jesus looked at the rich, young ruler and the text tells us he “loved” him but clearly that “love” was compassion. Greek scholar Leon Morris, in his book, *Testaments of Love*, concludes that we cannot make a hard and fast distinction between *agape* and *phileo* (“affection”). He provides several examples of where the terms seem to overlap.

In spite of all that, I think we would all agree that the ideal is to couple *agape* (commitment) with positive feelings for the person, as much as possible. We’re not going to love our enemies “from the bottom of our heart,” but we can be *committed* to them. It’s hard, but doable.

Clearly, the most pleasing love, the “best” love, combines all of these principles: *agape*, *splankna*, *phileo* (and another, rarely used word, *storge*). It is probably best illustrated in our love for our families. In Hawaii, there’s a great word, *ohana*, a word that means “family” but goes beyond the physical relationship to include those who are considered “family.”

Many of us have relationships with others to whom we are not physically related but who are considered “family.” We may spend holidays together or share gifts on occasion. These relationships are heartwarming; the members of this intentional family are “ohana.”

That’s a wonderful way to describe our relationship with each other in the church. It’s “ohana”; the church is our *intentional* family. The word emphasizes that the family is gladly bound together and its members cooperate and remember one another in their prayers. That’s love of the “*splankna*” variety.