

**Lent 3, Year C: A Love Beyond Convention**

4pm Jazz Vespers Service at St. Andrew's-Wesley United Church

With the Lesley Branton Quartet

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**1 John 4:7-12 (NRSVue)**

<sup>7</sup> Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. <sup>8</sup> Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love. <sup>9</sup> God's love was revealed among us in this way: God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him. <sup>10</sup> In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins. <sup>11</sup> Beloved, since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another. <sup>12</sup> No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God abides in us, and his love is perfected in us.

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**Song:** *How High the Moon***Reflection I, Move I:**

The best theology often comes from the least expected places – like *Sesame Street*. On December 27<sup>th</sup>, in the year of our Lord 1982, a Cupid-clad Bert is pulled to the recital stage by Ernie to sing a number about love. At first, an extremely reluctant, cantankerous, and obviously anxious Bert begins to sing a schmalzy recitative about some idealized understanding of love. The music is jagged, pointed, unrehearsed and *forced* – a song that the singer clearly thinks would be better left unsung. And can you blame Bert? “Love is two hearts beating as one.” “Love is the ecstasy of joy.” Midway through another sappy cliché about love, Bert cuts the music and says, “Ernie, I can’t do this,” perhaps the grumpiest Cupid known to Muppet kind. As Ernie comes out from behind the curtain, Bert says, “Ernie, that’s not what love is, at least not to me.” A curious Ernie responds, “well, what is love to you, Bert?” Ever the queer icon, Bert attempts to try to explain what love is to him with a song:

*When I see some baby pigeons with their mommy in a nest  
I get a joyous feeling sorta rising in my chest  
That's love*

*When I see a perfect rock or a row of paper clips  
A quiet kind of pleasure makes a smile come to my lips  
That's love, too*

*When I hold my little nephew and I bounce him on my knee  
I'm smiling down at him and he's smiling up at me  
That's love*

*Love's a simple thing to see, oh, I go on for hours  
 With oatmeal in a bowl to love, who needs hearts and flowers?  
 And even though his silly tricks can drive us far apart  
 I'll always have a special place for Ernie in my heart<sup>1</sup>*

Let's have a listen to the clip. (Cue the soundboard)

*That's Love* was written by David Connor, a composer who worked for *Sesame Street* from to lyrics written by Sarah Compton, a fellow longtime writer for the beloved children's. The character scripts for Bert and Ernie, however, were written by Mark Saltzman, an openly partnered gay man who fashioned the two Muppets after his own relationship with Arnold Glassman. Years after he had left the show, following the death of his partner in 2003, in a 2018 interview with Queerty, Saltzman shared that,

I remember one time that a column from *The San Francisco Chronicle*, a preschooler in the city turned to mom and asked “are Bert & Ernie lovers?” And that, coming from a preschooler was fun. And that got passed around, and everyone had their chuckle and went back to it. And I always felt that without a huge agenda, when I was writing Bert & Ernie, they were. I didn't have any other way to contextualize them. The other thing was, more than one person referred to Arnie & I as “Bert & Ernie.”<sup>2</sup>

When Saltzman was pressed further by the interviewer about whether “Bert and Ernie became analogs for your relationship,” he responded,

Yeah. Because how else? That's what I had in my life, a Bert & Ernie relationship. How could it not permeate? The things that would tick off Arnie would be the things that would tick off Bert. How could it not? I will say that I would never have said to the head writer, “oh, I'm writing this, this is my partner and me.” But those two, Snuffalupagus, because he's the sort of clinically depressed Muppet...you had characters that appealed to a gay audience. And Snuffy, this depressed person nobody can see, that's sort of Kafka! It's sort of gay closeted too.<sup>3</sup>

Without an agenda, Saltzman captured a unique aspect of the human condition – free-flowing love that defies conventions, labels, and expectations. Like the unusual but uniquely fitting love shared between Bert and Ernie, Saltzman imparted his own experiences of love with Glassman onto a generation of audience members that grew up seeing the beauty of love that defies easy categorization. While *Sesame Street* would later issue a statement that said,

Bert and Ernie are best friends. They were created to teach preschoolers that people can be good friends with those who are very different from themselves. Even though they are

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<sup>1</sup> 1:14 [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AW0b5V\\_SZt8](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AW0b5V_SZt8)

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.queerty.com/exclusive-bert-ernie-couple-finally-answer-20180916/>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.queerty.com/exclusive-bert-ernie-couple-finally-answer-20180916/>

identified as male characters and possess many human traits and characteristics (as most Sesame Street Muppets do), they remain puppets and do not have a sexual orientation.<sup>4</sup>

Saltzman continued to believe that the couple were indeed gay, affirming the queer icon status of the dynamic puppet duo. Regardless of the official statement from *Sesame Street* head office, the love of Bert and Ernie remains a love beyond convention – a beautiful example of loving male relationship, a relationship that has inspired many decades of queer, straight, and questioning children, teenagers, and adults. When considered within the cultural context of the HIV/AIDS crisis of the 1980's, and the death of the show's creator, Jim Hensen, from the disease in 1992, Saltzman's writing points to a powerful witness of self-giving love.

### Reflection I, Move II: 1 John 4:7-12 and loving the Other as participating in God's Love

In the Christian tradition, we have a name for this type of love – *agape* (ἀγάπη), meaning love, charity, or affection, connotating a self-giving, self-sacrificial love, which comes from the koine Greek language of the New Testament. This can be contrasted with the other three main words for love in Greek: (1) *eros* (sexual love), (2) *philia* (friendly love), (3) *storge* (love between parents and children), as well as with three lesser known terms, (4) *pragma* (long-term pragmatic love), (5) *philautia* (self-love), and (6) *xenia* (friendship and hospitality).<sup>5</sup> Out of the eight words of love in Greek, *agape* love was considered the pinnacle, the highest form that incorporated aspects of the other seven varieties of love. Listen to the following passage and take a look on the screen for the word that the author of 1 John uses to describe the ideal of love rooted in Christ:

Beloved (Ἀγαπητοί) let us love one another (ἀγαπῶμεν), because love (ἀγάπη) is from God; everyone who loves (ἀγαπῶν) is born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love (ἀγαπᾶν) does not know God, for God is love (ἀγάπη). God's love (ἀγάπη) was revealed among us in this way: God sent their only Son into the world so that we might live through him. In this is love (ἀγάπη), not that we loved (ἠγαπήκαμεν) God but that they loved us (ἠγάπησεν) and sent their Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins. Beloved (Ἀγαπητοί), since God loved (ἀγαπητοί) us so much, we also ought to love (ἀγαπᾶν) one another. No one has ever seen God; if we love one another (ἀγαπῶμεν), God abides in us, and their love (ἀγάπη) is perfected in us. (1 John 4:7-12, NRSVue, adapted by Ben).

The richness of the Greek language unearths a poverty, a dearth of vocabulary in our own English language. We have all felt or recognized the varieties of love present here – whether it is recognized in the label-defying queer relationship of Bert and Ernie, from the experiences each of our lives, where self-giving love is, the Spirit of God is present. And how different would the world be if such *agape* love would be embodied in our places of work, government, worship, study, and artistic expression? This understanding of love is what moved The United Church of Canada to become the first major Christian denomination becoming fully affirming of homosexual persons

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/tv-and-radio/2018/sep/18/sesame-street-bert-and-ernie-remain-puppets-and-do-not-have-a-sexual-orientation>.

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.dictionary.com/e/greek-words-for-love/>.

in 1986, speaking a word of *agape* love into the tense atmosphere of the 1980's surrounding queer rights and loving your neighbour as yourself. When *agape* love is centre-stage, there would be no room for attacking trans siblings in God, no children caged at borders, no room for residential schools, or the military industrial complex. Instead of a fever of control and power, we would burn with a fever for the welfare of all people.

**Interlude:** *Fever, The Nearness of You*

## Reflection II, Move III:

The jazz tradition, at its very core, also embodies *agape* love. When one writes a tune for someone they love, when one plays music for a cause they believe in, when one offers their art without strings attached, a self-giving love is on full-display for the world to witness. It's so very clear to me when the unhealthy distortions of the other seven types of love are at the forefront of the stage, or the pulpit, for that matter. Take, for example, the singer that is clearly too in love with themselves – a distortion of *philautia* (self-love), represents an imbalance within the ecosystem of love that the *agape* contains. Many of us has seen it: the arrogance, the distaste for others, the diva attitude that belittles their fellow music maker. The same singer, when engaging *philia* love (friendship), would not lose their prowess. No, they would only be open to greater authentic interaction with their bandmates, with the audiences that they serve, with deeper engagement of the creative spirit. Their love of self would be tempered by *loving their neighbour* as they love themselves - a short falling that I'm sure many of us can resonate with.

Such distortions of love aren't only related to the world of music. Consider *xenia* (friendship and hospitality), for a moment. What at first sounds like an inherently good thing, can also be abused. Consider the person who gives and gives and gives, to the point that they burn themselves out in the name of helping others, often becoming an embittered martyr. Where is the *philautia* (love of self) that is required to sustain such folk? Many of us in helping professions, such as nursing, teaching, ministry, caregiving, often fall into such a pitfall. I can speak to this first-hand as a pastor – for many of us, we can fall into the sin of not *loving ourselves* as we love our neighbour, a part of the Golden rule that often gets overlooked. Learning to embrace a healthy, balanced *philautia* (self-love) can be a daring act against tendencies of burnout, people-pleasing, and the capitalist death-drive to constantly produce.

## Reflection II, Move IV:

We need all the forms of love in balance with one another so as to serve with self-giving action, a love beyond convention. “Beloved let us love one another because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God.” Indeed, what the letter writer is pointing us toward is a simple truth – that when we engage in acts of *agape* love we are participating in the Spirit of God already at play in the world. While there might be some metaphysical or spiritual truth in Bert's statement that “love is two hearts beating as one,” or that “love is the ecstasy of joy,” love also runs much deeper. Love is incarnational. Love exists in baby pigeons at their mothers nest. Love exists in acts of artistic expression that stir the soul. Love exists in protest of the

collusion with death against the powers that be. Love exists in a broken cross outside Jerusalem, as within the hearts of those crucified by the sins of society. Love exists in couples, in friends, in spaces where the Spirit is so strong that language fails to capture the dynamicity of its capacity and movement. When we live in this state of love, we live into the very definition of God: “everyone who loves is born of God and knows God.” This allows God, the unknowable, the untameable, uncategorizable, and uncontrollable, to be made manifest amongst us, embodying the divine on us as we embody the human on Christ, in Christ, and through Christ. Amen.

**Song:** *I Could Write a Book*

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