

A Many-Splendored Thing

A Many-Splendored Thing is the title of a 1952 book. It was made into 1955 movie titled *Love is a Many-Splendored Thing*. You probably know the recording by that name which has been covered from 1955 to at least 2012. But neither book, movie, nor song say anything that John didn't say first. He's the apostle of love. He uses the verb *agapaō* 51 of the 142 times it's used in the NT and he uses the noun *agapē* 25 of the 117 times. Yet, when I come to texts like ours. I don't hear love, love, love as the Beatles sing. I hear law, law, law. But that's all me. Of the 28 verbs in this text only one is an imperative, one a command. "You *must* remain in My love."

His love is many-splendored. Jesus says, "As the Father has loved Me that's how I have loved you." At His Baptism and His transfiguration the Father bellowed from heaven: "This is My beloved Son." Jesus loves me like that? In a New Orleans cemetery, there's a monument showing mother and child clinging to a shipwreck in a storm. It's inscribed July 4, 1900. They were the sole survivors of a large estate. It mattered who died last. The court concluded it had to be the child because the mother would've kept her safe till she died (*En. Of 7700 Illus.*, 3646). As Shenandoah sang in 1993, "I wanna be loved like that." Jesus says you are; maybe not by a single human being even by mother, but by God in the flesh.

It doesn't take much to know, "Yes, Jesus loves me", but to remain in that love is far harder. No sooner does the Father bellow His love from heaven at the Jordan; then Satan shows up saying, "Are you really God's Son? Then why are you hungry? Why don't you test His love? Why don't you throw yourself off the temple and see if His angels will catch you as promised? And if you are His beloved Son, why is He sending you the way of suffering and death to gain the kingdoms of the world? Worship me and I can give you them all right now."

Don't tell me you don't know the struggle of remaining in His love. We are ever tempted by our 3 great enemies Devil, World, and Flesh to not believe Jesus really does love us and so give into despair which leads to other great shame and vice. And the unholy 3 have plenty of evidence to make their case that you are unloved. We have health problems, marriage problems, family problems, work problems. The world is going to hell in the proverbial handbasket, and what is the Lord doing? The Lord said the Land of Canaan vomited out it's people in His judgment over the very things our land is guilty of: child sacrifice, sexual immorality, and idolatry (Lev. 18:25-28) . Yet America goes on sinning with impunity. Can't you relate to the weeping prophet, Jeremiah? "Listen to the cry of my people from a land far away: 'Is the Lord not in Zion? Is her King no longer there?...' The harvest is past, the summer has ended, and we are not saved.' Since my people are crushed, I am crushed; I mourn, and horror grips me. Is there no balm in Gilead? Is there no physician there? Why then is there no healing for the wound of my people" (8:19-22).

God's love doesn't seem that splendid let alone many-splendored. In a sermon Luther has Jesus addressing the struggle to remain in His love in the face of suffering, hardship, heartbreak; maybe even in the face of political upheaval, and a world-wide pandemic? Jesus says, "Let My love be stronger, greater, mightier than the suffering you feel. For I know that the devil will harass you severely for My sake, to sadden and weary you, to make you impatient, to induce you to defect, and to make you say: 'I wish I had never had anything to do with this!' That is the sentiment of many right now" (LW, 24, 247). And Luther has Jesus answering that sentiment: "That is not the right attitude. Do not let the devil, the world, or your own flesh overcome you; but think of how I have loved you and still love you. Call to mind what I have spent on you to make you righteous and to save you, to make you acceptable to the Father, to make you His priest and servant and My disciple" (Ibid.).

Getting a whiff now of the many splendiddness of His love? There is clean-sheet forgiveness, dried in the fresh-air blessedness, a love that transcends time and space and sin and sinfulness. But then the window to eternal love is shut by that word 'commandments'. No doubt about it. Jesus says we remain in His love by obeying His commandments. What commandments did Jesus specifically leave His disciples? "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations baptizing and teaching." "Receive the Holy Spirit whosoever sins you forgive they are forgiven." "Do this often to bring me back to you." Hear Luther preach it: "Therefore He wants to say: 'I am not imposing a heavy burden and load on you, many sacrifices and manifold service of God, or anything that entails great expense or labor. I have imposed the Gospel, Baptism, and the Sacrament on you. And this is no commandment: it is your treasure, which I have given you gratis" (Ibid., 252). We come to be called 'friends' of God by being recipients of His benefits not by doing things for God (Ibid., 256).

The commandments of Jesus that you literally 'observe' cause you to remain in His love because there is nothing but His love in Baptism, Absolution, and Communion. You know that old illustrations of Jesus at the cross. I asked Jesus how much He loved Me and He stretched out His arms to be nailed to the cross of hell, wrath, and death and said, "This much." That's good, but carry it through. Carry it through to the art work on the Lenten Devotions where from the crucified Jesus blood fills the Communion chalice. Carry through to the 16th century painting where Jesus' blood shoots out His spear-pierced side and onto the head of the painter. Carry it through where the water that flowed from His wounded side fills the Baptismal font. In these 3 is God's love for you in Christ today. The holy Jesus, bearing your sins, the sins of the world, was sacrificed to pay for them all, and having done so, He was risen from the dead. So, His blood is not coagulated let alone putrid but smells like sweet wine. And Baptismal waters aren't stagnant but living. And Absolution isn't the word of a dead man but a living Lord.

You remain in the love of Jesus not when you wade through the sloughs of your sins and sinfulness looking for love there, but when you dive into the living, forgiving, loving waters of Baptism to be washed with more love than any mom ever washed her baby. You remain in Jesus' love when rather than going by what others, the devil, or even you think about the forgiveness of your sins, you go by His Word of absolution. If His Word sends your sins away no power on earth, under earth, or even in heaven can bring them back to you. You remain in Jesus love for you when you eat His body and drink His blood. The newly married feeding each other cake isn't meant as point of humor to smear each other with frosting. No, it's a symbol of their bodily care for one another. Well, only Jesus in this marriage gives His Body for Bread and His Blood for Wine. That's how He expresses His love for us. We express our love for Him by receiving it. More about that later. Tell me: Love like this. How can it *not* be many-splendored, splendid. Who wouldn't *want* to remain in a love like this?

He loves us in Word and Sacrament. We know that love by using them, trusting them, and to some extent this is how we love Him, but Jesus really doesn't need our love. Our neighbor does, and so the last verse is, "This is my command. Love each other." Here we go again. It's relatively easy to love the God you can't see; your neighbor, your ugly, grouchy, stinking neighbor is another story. That's why John says the test for loving God you can't see is not whether you say you do but whether you love the neighbor you do see (1 Jn. 4:20). Gulp.

Lack of love, if persisted in, leads to a denial of what Christ did for us. Jesus says, "My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you." Notice where it starts. With His love for you. With Him calling you not servants who are always under law but friends who He has told everything. Got that? Everything: the whole story of your sin and sinfulness. The whole truth what God thinks of you is not in your thoughts, in the hidden will of God that allows so much suffering and damns so many, but in what God in Christ tells you in Word and Sacrament. Moreover, whatever you ask the Father in Jesus' name, Jesus promises His Father will give it. Run with this promise. This is not *carte blanche* that whatever your heart – which Paul says doesn't know what it ought to pray for (Rom. 8:26) – asks for it's going to get. But whatever is consistent with Jesus' name. The thorn in Paul's flesh, his being poured out as drink offering, his being abandoned by all at trial, his being able to do nothing with Alexander the coppersmith, all were consistent with Jesus' name. So, whatever way God answers your prayer, it's consistent with your being in Jesus' name.

Loving one's neighbor starts with knowing God's many-splendored love for you in Christ. Hear this true story. 35 years ago in LA a couple were seen arguing. The woman sat on a bridge railing when the man attempted to kiss her. She dodged the kiss and fell 50 feet to her death ("Woman Dies in Fall Trying to Avoid Kiss", *Schenectady Gazette*, 9-23-86). This is the path of Judas. He wouldn't believe that though repentant of betraying Jesus, his Lord could forgive him. He went from unbelief, to despair, and to the great shame of suicide. He didn't think God's love could extend to where he was. No one can love their neighbor without first knowing that God's love in Christ not just extends to them but floods their life. The rest of story I just told is that "When the man tried to keep her from falling, he also fell" to his death. That's Jesus. He loves us to death. His death. That's how splendid His love for us is.

Book, movie, song are all about love between people, but Christians know from Paul that even the dizzying heights and depths of human love in marriage is only seeing in a mirror dimly the reality of Christ's love for His Bride. That's many-splendored, and it's yours. Amen

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