

Bonds of affection: How do we love when we disagree?

by [Scott Bader-Saye](#) in the [November 26, 2014](#) issue



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What does it take to hold people together despite disagreements and differences? It seems a very basic question, but it is hard to answer.

This past summer witnessed various church bodies wrestling with weighty and divisive issues. The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) voted at its General Assembly to permit Presbyterian clergy to perform same-sex weddings in states where this is legal. In another contested move, the PCUSA decided to divest from certain corporations whose business with Israel was seen to be supportive of the occupation of Palestinian territories. The Church of England voted to ordain women as bishops over the outcry of those still hoping for reconciliation with Rome. A United Methodist Church committee reinstated a Methodist minister who had been defrocked for performing the wedding of his gay son. Each of these decisions challenged the ties that bind people together in these churches.

Given these realities, how do we make sense of Jesus' words in John 13:34-35 in which he makes love for one another the key mark of the church? "By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another." What kind of

love can be nurtured and sustained honestly in the midst of such disagreement?

In his insightful study *The Four Loves*, C. S. Lewis parses the varieties of love by exploring four Greek terms: *eros*, *philia*, *storge*, and *agape*. In looking at this work recently I wondered why *storge* (affection) had never been given the same theological attention as *eros*, *philia*, and *agape*. Theological debates about *eros* and *agape* (love as desire and love as gift) have raged at least since Anders Nygren's *Agape and Eros* (1930). Recent theologians have emphasized the significance of *philia*, friendship, arguing that friendship with God is the ultimate end of human life and the glue that holds together the body of Christ. Drawing on Aristotle's account of friendship as determinative for the good working of the polis, theologians such as Stanley Hauerwas and Charles Pinches (in *Christians among the Virtues*), as well as Paul Wadell (*Friendship and the Moral Life* and *Becoming Friends*), have urged us to think about the centrality of friendship in the Christian life.

But what of *storge*? Is affection just too weak to do any theological work? One place where affection lives on as an ecclesial description is in the phrase "bonds of affection," long used in the Anglican Communion to describe the connection that links churches of that tradition across history, continents, and languages. In recent years this phrase has become important as those bonds have been strained by debates over homosexuality and women's ordination.

To remedy the strain, one proposal, now in its death throes, was to create an Anglican Covenant that would define more precisely and juridically the nature of the communion. While I think there is a good biblical basis for the language of covenant, I am also aware how quickly the terms of a covenant can morph into the terms of a contract in such a way that the relational goods we count as part of the bonds of affection are replaced by quasi-legal accountability.

What is the theological and ecclesial significance of affection? Affection grows by virtue of shared time and space. Its most basic form is the love shared within families, but it includes the fond feelings we have for people in our neighborhood or workplace or for pets. What is most interesting about affection is that it does not rely on shared interests, ideas, or passions (as does friendship), nor does it rely on shared attraction (as does *eros*). Rather, it grows out of the regular routines of shared life, short conversations, exchanged pleasantries, and proffered gratuities. Affection is of all the loves most linked to place—it arises among those who find themselves sharing a common life not because they chose one another but because

they found themselves thrown together.

Affection may be what we most need in the church because, as Lewis observes, affection is “the least discriminating of loves. . . . Almost anyone can become an object of Affection. . . . There need be no apparent fitness between those whom it unites.”

The danger of thinking about the church in terms of friendship is that it may imply that we need a high level of agreement in order to be church together. This is a potential recipe for schism. Further, as Aristotle noted, it is hard to have many true friends. We are not likely to find a large number of people with whom we share a great deal, and even if we did, we are unlikely to have the time to develop those relationships. Yet we can share affection for a wide swath of people with whom we do not have much in common and with whom we may not be inclined to be friends.

One of the gifts that arises from affection is that we begin to appreciate things about one another that we might not have attended to otherwise. Lewis notes that affection “can ‘rub along’ with the most unpromising people. Yet oddly enough this very fact means that it can in the end make appreciations possible which but for it, might never have existed.”

Just as the reader with wide taste can find a suitable book on the rack outside a store for used books, Lewis writes, so “the truly wide taste in humanity will similarly find something to appreciate in the cross-section of humanity whom one has to meet every day. In my experience it is Affection that creates this taste, teaching us first to notice, then to endure, then to smile at, then to enjoy, and finally to appreciate, the people who ‘happen to be there.’”

I wonder if some people leave church because they expect to find a community of like-minded friends and instead bump up against cranky people who rub them the wrong way. Focusing on affection helps us to have realistic expectations. We may never really like everyone in the pews around us, but we can strive to notice, endure, smile, and even appreciate them. I cherish fond memories of an older gentleman in a parish I attended many years back. He was a bit gruff at times, though he seemed to know this, and he would regularly conclude a nay-saying rant with “I’m askin’, OK? I’m just askin’.” In those words of meager but authentic humility, he made it possible for many of us to have affection for him.

I think of the relationship that has grown between the people I regularly ride the bus to work with and the regular driver. The affection that has developed over time emerged out of small acts of gratuity—the shared smile, the “thank you,” the “have a nice day” that exceeded the payment already made for the ride. Such excess of mannerly gratuity may seem small, but over time it increases affection, which heightens sympathy and can become meaningful when, say, discussions arise at city council meetings about compensation for bus drivers. What moves many of us at that moment is not likely an abstract account of a just wage (though that would not be a bad thing) but rather the affection that has convinced us we share a common life.

Cultivating affection requires a deep commitment to presence. It cuts against cultural trends toward mobility and virtual relationships. Physical presence, bodily quirks, and simply brushing up against one another all contribute to affection. Affection grows from the soil of time and space, from commitment to place and community. Gathering becomes the critical practice through which one learns to love those we thought we couldn’t love, those who are not like us, those who will never be more than acquaintances. This is not to say that affection requires no effort at all, but that the effort is more like receiving the presence of the other than striving to make common cause with the other.

Affection may seem a weak aspiration when compared to more robust forms of love. But it brings its own peculiar gifts of enjoyment and appreciation that may finally be crucial for sustaining churches that can no longer rely on shared judgments to make us one body. Perhaps they will know we are Christians by our affection.