

How do I love thee?

How could the disciples' hearts not be troubled?

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[How Do I Love Thee? Let me count the ways.](#)

The story this week from the Gospel of John is an intimate tale of fidelity, commitment and trust. In the midst of feelings of abandonment, betrayal, grief and fear, Jesus comforts his disciples. “Do not let your hearts be troubled,” he says to them.

But how could they *not* be troubled? He’s told them he’s about to die, that Judas is about to betray him, that Peter is about to deny him, and that he’s going somewhere they can’t go. “Where, where, where?” they clamor.

In comforting them, Jesus tells his disciples to trust. Many translations use the English word “believe” for the Greek *pisteuo*, but we have so flattened this word that it conveys to most listeners the sense of intellectual assent. *Pisteuo* has more of a connotation of trust and fidelity. It’s a relationship thing, not an intellectual thing.

Jesus tells his followers that they are not going to lose him, but to the disciples this is crazy talk. Look, they say, you’re going to be gone, separate from us, and *we don’t know how to find you!* In the disciples’ reactions I see the panic of imminent loss and abandonment, but Jesus never slackens in his offer of comfort and teaching.

Jesus tells them to trust in God and trust in him. He also implicitly tells them to trust in themselves and in their relationship. “You do know the way,” he asserts. “I am the way,” and you know me. Trust yourself to know what you know. Trust what we have done here together. Keep doing it. Keep loving each other as I have loved you. You know God, because you know me. You know the way, because you know me. Trust yourselves, trust me, trust God.

This is love language, meant to reinforce the love relationship between Jesus and the disciples. Love language asserts devotion and commitment. “There is no one else in the world for me” or “you are the most beautiful woman in the world” or “you are my everything.” Whatever the words, they are meant as a sign of deep connection.

When “doubting” Thomas contradicts Jesus by saying, “We don’t know where you’re going. How can we know the way?” Jesus answers, “I am the way.” Don’t be distracted, don’t be afraid—TRUST ME. Look at me and only me.

This love language is intensified because it is shared in the face of death. When humans confront death, we drop into our most basic, primal humanity. I’ve experienced this in hospital moments with people confronting their own death, and with family members who have lost or are about to lose a loved one. The grief is raw, the reactions are physical and powerfully emotional.

In this context, Jesus says to his disciples, you belong to me and I belong to you. Nothing will ever be able to separate us or keep us apart. My love will live on in you, and between you. If you love me, keep my commandments. Love one another as I have loved you.

If you love one another is this way, the way I’ve loved you, Jesus says, that’s how you will be identifiable as my disciples. Questions of identity run through this and other lectionary readings for this week. 1 Peter quotes Hosea in saying, “Once you were not a people, but now you are God’s people.” And in Acts, Stephen is stoned to death because his adversaries say he follows “this Jesus” who “will destroy this place and will change the customs that Moses handed on to us.” In some ways, this seems like a challenge to the group identity.

That stoning mentality is exactly what we want to avoid in our interpretation of the John text. Love language and identity formation (or maintenance) does not require us to disrespect or mistreat people in other love relationships with God or with identities which differ from our own. I’ve taken to calling myself a *pluralist* Christian, both claiming my identity as a follower of Jesus and further defining *how* I follow Jesus. Diana Eck has a [great, basic definition of pluralism](#) as 1) an energetic engagement with diversity; 2) an active seeking of understanding across lines of difference; 3) an encounter of commitments; 4) Pluralism is based on dialogue.

When Jesus makes his exceptional claim (no one comes to the Father except through me), he is using love language with the people who love him most and are about to go through serious trauma with him. Barbara Brown Taylor and others have reflected on the intimacy and love language in this passage. It's not language intended to exclude others, but rather language intended to embrace those closest to him and to comfort. Come to me, and come to God through me. Remember? We have already been doing it.