

Love Is a Many-Splendored Thing...
Dr. Bob Hawkins

Sonnet 43 of Elizabeth Barrett Browning's *Sonnets from the Portuguese* (ca. 1845-46 / pub. 1850) opens with the familiar line, "How do I love thee? Let me count the ways..." Although written for her future husband, the poet Robert Browning, the collection of sonnets reflects not only on the many-splendored aspects of love, but also the related topics of awakening, fear and doubt, passion, companionship, gained wisdom, and ultimately, of letting go and entering the eternal rest and peace God grants. The forty-third sonnet is deservedly popular because Barrett Browning was able to address the height, depth, and breadth of love in fourteen, brief lines. Folks are likely to remember the famous opening phrase even if they have no idea about its source.

The hard-won wisdom that Barrett Browning and so many other writers – biblical authors included – have reflected upon through the centuries reveals that love cannot be reduced to puppy love, crushes, emotional and hormonal buzz, April love, nor picture-perfect wedding day glitz and glamor. Those are but passing blips on a far more complex spectrum of experience, memory, relationship, joy and delight, loss and mourning. As we approach the fifth Sunday of Easter, the Gospel writer and others continue to ponder human and divine love in all its many-splendored and often challenging aspects. John 13:31-35 records Jesus' Last Supper conversation immediately after Judas leaves, caught up in the treachery of his actions. The mood at table likely was tense, the disciples dismayed and confused at Jesus' puzzling words regarding betrayal as well as love.

It is in this bewilderingly charged atmosphere that Jesus points to the glory rapidly unfolding before them. He presents a new commandment as words of farewell to those whom he had called into ministry: *Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another...* [John 13:34b]. They and all Jesus' followers are to love, yes, but love "as [Jesus] has loved." The love Jesus revealed throughout his ministry and companionship with his followers is radically different from the self-limiting, so-called love folks often practice. Jesus' capacity to love breaks all the barriers, drilling through cultural and emotional walls of selfishness, fear, doubt, resentment, bias, convenience, class distinctions, political, religious, gender, and racial prejudices. As Jesus demonstrated the week after his resurrection, he will break through any walls and borders we try to build in fear or self-righteousness so that he can encounter, encourage, and call us to a saving change of perspective. He personifies the love which he commends to us. The Father of all mercies and now his resurrected Son see only the handiwork of creation which is both good [*tov!*] and the object of their fervent, holy love. They ask and expect no less from us, either, because their love *for us* bestows on us the needed gifts to love others as Jesus has loved us.

Sunday School and camp songs are occasionally as profound as they are simple. Last Sunday we sang [and some of us learned] the camp song, *I Just Wanna Be a Sheep – Baa, baa, baa, baa!* Resonating behind that good-hearted ditty are Jesus' words in John 10:16: *And I have other sheep that are not of this fold; I must bring them also, and they will heed my voice. So there shall be one flock, one shepherd.* From this we appropriately conclude that Jesus' flock doesn't reside in exclusive sheepfolds of our own making. There are other flocks we know nothing about, but all of them form the mega-flock of Christ. While the Church is the great assembly of those publicly gathered

by the Good Shepherd's call, there are so many who have yet to hear that call. Sometimes, the local outcroppings of the Church we call congregations or parishes may even make it unduly difficult to enter through the gates they tend. God's sobering reminder to us who consider ourselves "in" the sheepfold is that the Good Shepherd continues to call sheep beyond the borders. They WILL hear the voice of the Shepherd and hopefully will come whether we assist or not. However, Jesus does have pointed words for would-be disciples who do not assist.

Another wise children's song is "Jesus Loves the Little Children" in all the colors of Noah's rainbow. *All* are precious in God's sight, and because of Jesus' new commandment, they are to be precious in our sight, too. That still holds even after those cute, precious babies grow up into adults who look, sound, talk, and think differently than "our people" do. There's still work to be done, obviously.

Anna B. Warner and her older sister Susan hit the jackpot of Sunday School wisdom with their 1860 poem, *Jesus Loves Me*. First appearing in a novel, the words were intended as comfort to a dying child in the narrative. Like Barrett Browning's sonnet and the theme song of the 1955 movie, "Love Is a Many-Splendored Thing," "Jesus Loves Me" sets forth in simple rhyme the great mystery of love which the faithful experience in Jesus Christ. The song is remembered and often recited "...at the hour of our death" by countless people "...on this terrestrial ball." Jesus loves us without question; we depend upon it. Thus, it is helpful to remember the bashed up, soiled, and maimed teddy bears and doll babies clutched in our infancy which we so dearly loved. They have little to recommend them to others, yet they are irreplaceable. Their lovely beauty is in the eye of the toddler-beholder. This is no less true for God who beholds and surrounds us and all his rag-tag creation with an equally fierce love.