

Play  L-O-V-E

Nothing like starting a sermon with the soothing sounds of Nat King Cole! I asked Phil to play the snippet because today's study of the psalms is taking a different format. We will focus on the content of the psalms, but today I will begin by pointing out the structural format some of them take on.

The format of the Nat King Cole song "L-O-V-E" is what in poetry is called an acrostic. The artist uses the four letters of the word LOVE to express how they feel about the one to whom the song is addressed.

L is for the way you look at me

O is for the only one I see

V is very, very extraordinary

E is even more than anyone that you adore can love...

First, the acrostic, the chorus which explains what the emotions behind it:

Love is all that I can give to you

Love is more than just a game for two

Two in love can make it, take my heart and please don't break it

Love was made for me and you

It's really a quite simple formula, but it helps the author express the depths of their feelings.

Earlier this week I attended a two-day retreat on using art to amplify our worship lives. There was a lot of emphasis placed on using the creative gifts of the community to collaborate on expressing our interior faith in an exterior way. Our presenter, Anna Strickland from the organization *A Sanctified Art*, reminded us that too many of us are led to believe that if we can't produce a museum-worthy piece of art then we don't have artistic gifts. And yet over the course of four workshops she gave oodles of examples for how a congregation can call upon its gifts, both individually and corporately, to express their faith in ways that connect to the presence of God more deeply than our heavily focused use of spoken or sung words allow. As she hammered home to us, it is not the finished product that matters, as much as the ardor that goes into creating it.

At the end of the sermon, I'm going to give you a few minutes to write your own acrostic to express your LOVE:

Perhaps there is someone near to you that you love.

Or it could be like the psalmist expressing your love of GOD, JESUS, HOLY SPIRIT

Or, hearkening back to last week's ALL SAINTS / ALL SOULS days, a saint in your life. RDM or MLK or MOTHER MARY, etc

Or, you could share your love for the BROWNS – using very expressive, colorful language as many other psalmists have to vent their frustrations.

Here's an example to whet your creative appetite.

Pearl's husband

Devoted husband and father

One of the most genuine and kind people you would ever meet

Nearly every night said his prayers before going to sleep

Pretty straight-forward, right. So, get your creative juices flowing. And if you are only half listening to the rest of the sermon, I'll understand 😊

Alright – let's take a look at the two psalms which Jill read, and see how they take the form of an acrostic. The acrostics in the psalms were used as pneumatic devices to help people memorize the psalms. The accessibility to print was virtually rare when the psalms were composed, and in order for folks to internalize the messages of the psalms they needed to memorize them. Having them in alphabetical order helped with that discipline.

I discovered that the form the psalms take are described with a peculiar, yet straight-forward, name. They are *abecedarian* acrostics. Abecedarian, as in, alphabetical order. A B C D – abecedarian. Except, since they were composed in Hebrew they follow the pattern of the Hebrew alphabet. Let me show you what I mean.

א ב ג ד ה ו ז ח ט י כ ל מ נ ס ע פ צ ק ר ש ת

Psalm 25 (22 letters = 22 verses)

25:1 לְדָוִד

Of David.

אֵלֶיךָ יְהוָה נַפְשִׁי אֶשָּׂא:

א I offer my soul to you, **LORD**.

25:2 אֱלֹהֵי בָרַךְ בְּטַחַתִּי אֶל־אֲבוֹנָשָׁה אֶל־יַעֲלֹצוּ אֹיְבֵי לִי:

ב My **God**, I trust you. Please don't let me be put to shame!
Don't let my enemies rejoice over me!

25:3 גַּם כָּל־קִנְיֶיךָ לֹא יִבָּשׂוּ יִבָּשׂוּ הַבּוֹגְדִים רִיקָם:

ג For that matter, don't let anyone who hopes in you be put to shame;
instead, let those who are treacherous without excuse be put to shame.

25:4 דַּרְכֶיךָ יְהוָה הוֹדִיעֵנִי אֲרַחֲוֶתֶיךָ לִמְדֵנִי

ד Make your ways known to me, **LORD**; teach me your paths.

25:5 הִדְרִיכֵנִי בְּאֱמֻנָתְךָ וְלִמְדֵנִי כִּי־אַתָּה אֱלֹהֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל

ה Lead me in your truth—teach it to me—because you are the **God** who
saves me.

And on it goes.

As Psalm 25 uses a verse per letter, Psalm 111 is half as long because it uses a letter for each half of the verse. I'm sure those who were having to prove their ability to memorize were clambering to be the one to say this one.

A more imposing abecedarian acrostic is Psalm 119. It has 22 STANZAS, or strophes, made up of eight verses each, coming out to 176 verses in all.

Each strophe has a particular teaching assigned to it, so in the course of memorizing the strophes letter-by-letter, one would learn quite a bit about their faith. You can imagine the discipline (and time) it would take to learn all 22!

I wanted you to see the varieties of way that God is spoken of in the psalms, as well as the persistent use of the names of God. For ultimately, as the devotee moves through the process of learning each of these stanzas, or even each of the verses, the person of faith is able to internalize the qualities of the Divine One, and all of the ways in which God is a “our refuge and strength, a very present help in times of trouble” (Ps 46:1). The psalmists share their experience with this God, so that others may open themselves to the fact that God is present with them throughout all of the ups and downs of life – no matter the circumstances.

Throughout the reading of Psalm 25 we hear characteristics of this God:

Mercy	Steadfast love	Goodness	Uprightness	Faithfulness
Graciousness	Forgiveness			

The psalmists implore future generations to heed their writing, for as Psalm 111 puts it, “The fear of the Holy One is the beginning of wisdom.” The Hebrew word that most translations offer as “fear” means reverence. God is Almighty, and to be respected above all, and so is not to be taken lightly. However this is the God which is gracious to us when we are lonely and afflicted – God relieves the troubles of our hearts and brings us out of our distress (25:16-17). The psalmist assures us that all who study the precepts of God, and practice them (111:10), are blessed with understanding.

In other words, deep dives into the psalms allow us to receive the steadfast L-O-V-E of God into our souls, and by that we will have peace.

Now, let's lean into a few minutes to create our own acrostics – whatever you are carrying on your heart today. Your acrostic may be a name, or an emotion, or a place ... wherever you may have experienced the steadfast love of God throughout your life, or maybe even as recently as this morning. In order for Mike to be able to participate in this activity, I'm going to ask Phil to play a song. And when it ends, we will transition to our hymn “Renew Your Church.”

 With This Love by Peter Gabriel