

“Apples and Oranges”
1 John 3:16, 23-24; 5:1-2
John 15:9-17
May 9, 2021
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Apples and oranges are commonly thought to be very different.

The expression “That’s like apples and oranges” means that two things are fundamentally different, and are not a good comparison. / As in: “You can’t compare those two companies, or those two songs, or those two ideas, that’s just mixing apples and oranges”. / The expression has been around for a long time, and you’ve probably heard it before. / But did you know that it takes a variety of forms?

A number of European countries from Germany to Turkey say “apples and pears”.

As in: “Oh come on, that’s apples and pears”

The Welsh prefer to forbid comparing honey and butter.

And the Serbs warn against comparing grandmothers to toads.

Which is probably a good idea in any case.

We compare things - - for good reasons:

A good poem is often rooted in a unique comparison.

Metaphors are basically insightful comparisons.

Scientific research depends on comparison as a way to learn.

But apparently there are good comparisons - - and not so good ones.

Furthermore - - the idea that we should NOT compare apples and oranges has come under scrutiny in TWO scientific studies done by NASA and the British Medical Journal!

Admittedly at least one of these was intentionally tongue-in-cheek.

But it is interesting.

Both studies were aimed at taking the expression OUT of scientific studies.

They concluded that you actually COULD compare apples and oranges fairly easily, and so using the expression in a scientific paper was not helpful. / The NASA report states, “the comparing apples and oranges defense should no longer be considered valid ...in arguments and discussions” / The Medical study noted the increase in the use of the expression in medical literature and sought to correct the problem. / As surgeon James Barone wrote, “apples and oranges are sweet, similar in size, weight and shape. Both are grown, eaten - - and juiced.”

The real questions seem to be:

Why do we compare things?

And what do we learn - - or are we trying to suggest - - when we do?

In the animal world - - animals feel safe around similar creatures that they trust.

And if a creature is too different - - we either fight - - or engage in flight.

We get the heck away from the stranger - - or attack or defend.

So there is an element of survival.

On the other hand, the world of exploration is built on curiosity - - rather than survival.

The entire mission of the Enterprise in Star Trek was...

“To boldly go where no one had gone before”

And once there - - to observe - - and essentially to compare - -

- - to compare what they found to what they already knew.

If we push comparison to an even further frontier - - what about God?

Is there anything in our experience - - that we can compare to God?

And if NOT - - then how can we come to know anything about God?

Or if there IS a reasonable comparison - - what is it?

If we compare human love to God's love - - for example - - how do we know it's not just
 "apples and oranges"?

Which brings me to the scripture readings for this morning.

Many scholars have suggested that the letter of 1 John and the gospel on John should be compared because they are similar. / It's like they were written by the same person.

Certainly we can see what they mean if we read the verses I chose for today.

We have been reading through the letter of 1 John for several weeks. It is one of the selected lectionary readings for 6 weeks. / The gospel reading that accompanies it today is from the gospel of John.

Both readings refer to God's love abiding in us.

Both readings suggest laying down one's life as an expression of love.

This laying down one's life is to imitate the actions of Christ.

God loved us - - so we are called to BOTH love one another and to love God.

But is it fair to compare human love and God's love?

Aren't they fundamentally different?

Apples and oranges?

How can the perfect love of God - - be compared to the broken love of people?

On the other hand - - what other choice do we have?

How will we ever learn about love - - and about God?

If we don't love and learn - - what's there to do?

I've been thinking about all this recently - - while missing my cat.

So to shift gears a bit - - and to try on a comparison - - my feelings about my cat - - have helped me think about this reading from the Bible - - and how we compare human and divine love.

In this new case of my cat - - how do we compare the feelings we have about animals - - to our feelings generally - - for creation - - for other people - - and even toward God.

The day after we put Zora down I was in my front yard watering the lawn.

My neighbor asked how I was.

I said, "Not so good - - we have to say goodbye to our cat today"

He understood - - as they have an aging dog. / In sympathy he said: My friend just had to put his dog down. It's rough.

I did NOT say: 'Oh come on - - you can't compare love for a dog with love for a cat - - that's just apples and oranges!'"

I accepted the sympathy, and said:

"Nothing loves you like an animal"

I realized that the thing that really got to me wasn't so much that I loved my cat - - but the way she loved me. / She did follow me around like a dog - - actually.

Maybe on some level I want to be the person my cat thought I was.

But really it was about feeling a small wild creature - - trust you.

About a week later, Nancy and I watched a movie that won an Oscar in the documentary film category. / The title is: "My Octopus Teacher".

The movie is about a photographer named Craig Foster who spends a year befriendng an octopus in the ocean - - off the coast of South Africa. / In this AMAZNG film - - he shows us how he gained the trust of this wild animal. / He went back EVERY DAY to the same spot.

After months - - this wild octopus - - trusted him enough to touch him.

He said that some people wondered how he could dive every day in the same place.

He said it was the only way to really get to know the ocean - - the creatures - - and their patterns. / When they were COMPARED - - day after day - - they revealed small shifts - - and he came to know them - - and what was ordinary and what was not.

It's impossible to say what the octopus felt.

Who really knows about the emotional lives of animals...?

Well - - there is no doubt that this octopus changed - - and came to trust.

And there is no doubt - - that the experience changed the diver Craig.

Not only did he learn about the ocean and the octopus - - he learned about himself.

So without saying too much - - and becoming the spoiler of the ending if you've not seen it - - I'll just say that ultimately it was what he learned about himself and his relationships that made the movie profound - - because he learned them from an octopus.

How do we learn about love?

How do we learn about God?

What does it mean when we say that God loves us?

And how can we learn about God's love - - if not by loving other - - people?

Maybe the difference between God and a human being is - - as great as the difference between a human and an octopus. / Maybe it's just apples and oranges.

But maybe - - that's not as different as we think!

The readings from John's gospel and the letter of 1 John invite comparison.

They inspire me to think beyond myself.

A long dense metaphorical gospel and a three page letter both point me to the same place.

I find myself believing that the answer really is “YES”

Can God’s love really abide in me?

Can I really abide in God?

It seems like - - whoever wrote these ancient texts thought we could really know God.

It seems like - - this ancient writer had experienced something profound.

To be loved by another creature is moving and can be life changing.

To be loved by another person - - can be the best thing in life.

So - - to be loved by God - - imagine!

Or maybe we don’t have to just imagine...

Maybe we can imagine - - and then abide.