My Brothers and Sisters in Christ, let us pray. Lord God of our Lenten Hearts, Minds, Spirits, and Souls, may the words of my mouth and the meditation of all of our hearts always be acceptable in your sight, our strength and our redeemer, Amen.

God gave us these commandments for a reason. What do we think that was (take all answers). Egypt had owned the Hebrews and told them what to think, what to do, and what the rules are in terms of their rights when they encounter others while they were slaves for 400 years. Go outside those boundaries and the consequences were severe and harsh.

The slave-master relationship is not based on love, but of following laws, no matter how unjust to the slave. After many generations, it’s not hard to imagine that the Israelites forgot how to love.

How do we love in modern times? In the 1990s, a very popular book was published by a Baptist minister who counseled couples in trouble, called The Five Love Languages: Secrets to Love that Lasts. Folks are so desperate for an definitive answer to how we love that this book has sold over 20 million copies and is in our popular lexicon. It’s been around over 30 years, and books, commercials, movies and academic research have bombarded us these easy shortcuts to better communication and relationships. How many of you have read this book? (pause). How many of you know what your love language is?

Here are the five:

1. Words of Affirmation, or getting genuine encouragement often and gently.

2. Non-verbal physical cues, showing affection and making intimacy a thoughtful priority.

3. Receiving gifts, thoughtful ones which make others a priority and speaking purposefully. Small things matter in a big way, and expressing gratitude and thanks when getting a gift.

4. Quality time matters, one-on-one, with focused and uninterrupted conversations. Make time for the one you love. Check in, get away for a weekend.

5. Acts of service for others that are expressed actively, knowing that you’re partnered with the one you care about. Go out of your way to alleviate the daily grind. Do stuff together.

Now, therapists world over have encouraged couples to figure out how they best express the way they interact with their partners according to these love languages. Most of the time people focus on one of these things, with the express intention of getting their partner to interact with them in the way THEY can best engage. Many times partners end up choosing different of the five styles, sometimes multiples of them, and sometimes none of them. This kind of thing can be very frustrating for the folks who are trying to figure out the actions to take to establish, or re-establish intimacy in a relationship.

So now we come back to our scripture. Ask almost anyone about the nature of God and they’ll tell you what? God is love. And yet, not many people have a relationship with God or understand what that means, how to get started, how to keep it going, or what to expect. It feels like most folks have a problem figuring out how to relate to God. How to communicate with God. How to love God. Maybe to get folks introduced to God, we need to figure out God’s love language.

What do we think that is? Is it any one thing on this list? (take all answers). Let’s see how God shakes out these five criteria from pop culture.

What do we think are God’s words of affirmation? (pause) OK, it’s early on Sunday, so for my 2 cents that probably references the Bible and the very things we read right here from the lectern, right? God is trying to give us a gentle nudge to say that these things are worth paying attention to in order to relate to one another and follow God faithfully. God doesn’t beat us over the head with the Bible. It’s there for the taking and reading. Or not.

God gives us physical cues. God is the wind in the trees, the songs of the birds, the soft fur of a cat or dog, the longing gaze of a baby or someone we love. Our God of creation is with and through all things. It’s up to us to realize that what is before you is holy, even in the most mundane of days, there is God.

What gifts has God given? How about life itself? Our minds, with which we learn, question, and figure out our path to which God calls us? Our hearts, which give us the capacity to feel the full range of emotions that accompany compassion, mercy, and justice? And our spirits, the agency of God here on earth, that which we reach out to the poor, the underprivileged, the disinherited, the broken-hearted?

Quality time with God? What does that look like for you? Our love language book says that one on one time is crucial and critical for well-being. When was the last time you took time out to pray? I mean really pray, in an uninterrupted and focused fashion? To go relax in the sun. Walk in the woods. Sit in a chair with a cup of coffee or tea. Clearing your mind and really taking in the awe of the one who created you and all that’s around you. Do you rest in God? Is there a small, still voice that comes? It doesn’t always happen. But it will. Just like taking time for friends, we have to take time with God.

What really floats God’s boat is acts of service. Our missions ministry and our book groups can tell you all about these. We are a small but important part of a web that helps connect people in need through no fault of their own with organizations that care. It’s about money to keep those things going, for sure. But it’s also about keeping our society focused on the need, telling the stories, and advocating for change, such as the Granite State Organizing Project of New Hampshire clergy that lets this state’s towns and cities know that they can do more, too, if we just get creative.

So what is God’s love language? I’ll leave you with these final thoughts.

We are urged to choose which love language fits our needs. But God is bigger than that. God meets us where we are, but spurs us on to greater awareness. In the Ten Commandments given to us, God asks us to be loyal and faithful, and in a love relationship with God here’s what is possible.

Most of the commandments are negative formulae. “Thou Shalt Not” really means that we should refrain from violent behaviors with those most vulnerable in our lives. With this strong commitment, we can honor the human rights God has bestowed on us, having delivered us from the bondage. The bondage of working for ourselves to gain the most benefit, greater power, and then exercising that to oppress others to our will be done at the expense of the defenseless and meek.

God’s love language is all of this, and because it’s a covenant, it’s forever. But too often even here at church we emphasize religiosity that does not remember compassion and mercy to our neighbors, denies justice to those who don’t seek or hold power, and today—just for today—let’s try and enter into God’s perspective for us. It’s a divine privilege that we must care for and never forsake. But of course, like all things in church and with God, the choice lies with us.

Thanks be to God, Amen.