

Alleluia! Christ is Risen!

Have you ever run across the Amelia Bedelia books? Oh, she's amazing. For those of you that have yet to discover her brilliance, Amelia Bedelia is a housekeeper that takes everything extremely literally. Figures of speech or seemingly innocuous turns of phrase are never safe around Amelia Bedelia. Once, when she was instructed to make a date cake, she cut up a calendar to provide the titular ingredient. When asked to draw the drapes, she sat down with a sketchbook. She even tied expensive cuts of meat to green bean plants after being told to "stake the beans." It's silly and cute and just the sort of thing that'll make a little kid throw their head back and laugh in exasperated joy.

But my favorite Amelia Bedelia moment has gotta be when she was instructed to "dust the furniture." You can see where this is going. The family goes out, Amelia is left to puzzle over the task and worry about why her boss would ever desire such a thing, and finally, she decides they must know something she doesn't. She proceeds to make an enormous mess of the living room, of course, and covers every piece of furniture with dusting powder. See, Amelia fell into the trap of a linguistic curiosity known as a contronym, a word that's spelled the same and pronounced the same but has opposite meanings. For Amelia, "dust" is the problem. Dust can mean to remove small particles from something or to add small particles to something. Really, Amelia can't be blamed here.

Now, I love contronyms. "Cleave" is a good one. It can mean to attach two things to each other or to separate them. "Sanction" works, too: it can be a sort of approval or a restriction. Annoyingly, the word "literally" has become a contronym as of late. But these days, I'm tickled by a much older one: "stem-winder.

Stem-winder starts out as a reference to those old watches you'd have to crank up with a knob on the end of a stem. But it became a way to describe speeches. The kind of speech that had you jumping up and down, white-knuckling your program, and hollering in the fervor of a real barn-burner, well that humdinger of a speech was a real stem-winder. You'd gotten all wound up like the gears of a stem-winding watch, you see. Good stuff, stem-winders. But not always. Because sometimes a stem-winder was a speech that went on far too long and never really did much. That dull abuse of time disguised as rhetoric was a real stem-winder, too, because it took so long you had to keep on winding your watch. Not so good stuff, stem-winders. I love the ambiguity of these words! They're delightful and fun and--I know this is nerdy--but I get a real kick out of thinking up more examples. Most of the time. Most of the time, I get a kick out of thinking of these things, but I've realized there's one that I'm not sure I'm happy I've thought up. And that's "love."

See, I don't think it's meant to be a contronym. But the more I'm seeing our language used, the more I see this word, love, deployed in different ways. You could make the argument that people are just using the word incorrectly. But that's a particular linguistic claim. That's prescriptive, telling folks how they should use the word. Most linguists prefer the descriptive approach, that is, telling folks how a word is actually used. And when it comes down to it, we use the word "love" in opposing ways. I'm not talking about the difference between puppy love and a decades-old marriage. I'm not talking about emotional attachment versus physical attraction. I'm talking about love, Christian love, a prescription and a description. I'm talking about love as a commandment.

At the Last Supper, Jesus tells his remaining disciples "I give you a new commandment, that you love one another." It's not even "love your neighbor as yourself." That's a different Gospel. Here in John, it's "love

one another as I have loved you.” That’s an important distinction, right? Some of us are pretty generous with ourselves, but for a lot of us, our neighbors deserve to be loved a whole lot better than we love ourselves. But that’s another stem-winder for another day.

See, there’s more to it. Jesus doesn’t stop with the commandment to love. He keeps going. “By your love, everybody else’ll know that you follow me.” And that’s why I’m not happy about figuring out that love has become a contronym. Because in the Christian world, we love to talk about love. We know love is at the core of who we are, so we put it at the center of everything we do. I mean, the word shows up in the Bible somewhere between 300 and 550 times. Much of the time, the love that shows up is recognizable as love to us now. Sometimes it feels like a stretch. Romantic love is there, so is fraternal. Love within families certainly makes its share of appearances. And there’s sacrificial love, too, that’s a big one. But we Christians aren’t always so good at taking what’s in the Bible and applying it to our lives. And love is no exception. In fact, love may be one of the biggest offenders with other motivations wearing love as a disguise. It happens so often that non-Christian folks have learned to distrust us Christians when we get to talking about love. Because love gets deployed throughout history to justify all sorts of horrendous things. We see it all the time. “Love the sinner, hate the sin” is a prime example of this, though it’s hardly alone. It’s the idea behind what amounts to the psychological, and in many cases, physical abuses of the LGBTQ community in the name of God’s Love. Torture’s not love. That’s hate and fear masquerading as love. That’s perversion of love, taking the life-giving commandment and turning it to justify hateful things.

And just like love is not solely a Christian virtue, the perversion of love is not solely a Christian sin. The whole world seems to be falling into the traps of false love. And it makes me suspicious. Where love should point us to God, instead it raises our hackles. And this is where Christians are doing particular damage. Too many brandish love as a weapon in the name of God. And the more that opposite meaning of love gets used, the more we have to explain ourselves when real love shows up. Because too many know us Christians by our “love.”

Good people of God, good, loving people of God, I know you’ve heard me say that we have work to do. I know you’ve heard St. Francis’ quote that we should “preach the Gospel at all times, and when necessary, use words.” And I know some of you have heard our bishop say that now, these days, “It is necessary.” It is necessary for us to use our words now because those words have been used enough to have their meanings changed. If you pride yourself on being Christian, if you pride yourself on being Episcopalian, if you pride yourself on the love you feel here, if you’ve found forgiveness or redemption or freedom in this place, use our words.

I don’t want to be known as Christian if it means I don’t believe in science. I don’t want to be known as Christian if it means I’m hateful. And I don’t want to be known as Christian if it means I’m judgemental. But that’s what our love means to a whole lot of people. Y’all, it’s time to reclaim that language and it’s time to reclaim love. I want the world to know St. Thomas’ by our love. I want Hamilton to see something beautiful in our love. I want this place to know we’re about a truly loving God because of what we do and who we are. No confusion. No ambiguity. No contronyms. I want them to know us by our love. Christ’s love. God’s love. Alleluia! Christ is Risen!