

Sunday, May 25, 2014: John 14:15-21

by [Mark Ralls](#) in the [May 14, 2014](#) issue

"I love you little. I love you big. I love you like a little pig." During my visit to the nursing home that afternoon, I must have heard this sweet, odd rhyme more than a hundred times. I was sitting in the atrium, talking to a distinguished older man I had come to visit. He was a church member, and I enjoyed visiting him. But that particular day we were not sitting there alone. Near us sat a woman, another resident, wearing a nondescript pastel blouse and a broad, broad smile.

Though the woman sat close enough to touch, she expressed no interest in us or in our conversation. She just stared out the window and said those childlike words: "I love you little. I love you big." She repeated them again and again and again. "I love you like a little pig."

I tried my best to focus on the man I had come to see. But throughout my conversation with him, I caught myself wondering about our neighbor and her whimsical rhyme. Did she ever say anything else? Of all the words to remember, why these?

As I was leaving the nursing home, my curiosity got the better of me. I searched for a nurse and, feeling a little sheepish about interrupting her work, approached her. "Could I ask you an odd question?" I said. "The woman who sits in the atrium. She says this little rhyme over and over. Do you know why she does this?"

The nurse smiled and repeated the words with a dramatic flair: "I love you little. I love you big. I love you like a little pig!" She had obviously heard the rhyme thousands of times—and she wasn't the least bit tired of it. "That's Thelma," she explained. "She taught first grade for more than 30 years. Her little rhyme was her own special way of greeting the children each morning. As she helped them remove their coats, she would whisper those words in every little ear. It was her way to let each child know she possessed a special place in her heart."

Thelma's mind was ravaged by dementia, but here was this single holdout from her memory. I marveled at this.

Perhaps Thelma and her rhyme suggest a way to understand one of the most cryptic things Jesus says in the Gospels. "I am in my Father," he assures his disciples in this week's reading from John, "and you in me, and I in you" (14:20). Maybe this saying points to some esoteric, mystical indwelling. But I wonder if Jesus has something more familiar in mind, something more easily recognizable. I wonder if he is referring to a depth of loyalty and commitment—a love—that is typically reserved for the closest members of one's own family. This particular kind of love is expressed during moments of great challenge, moments when we say something even stronger than the colloquial "I am behind you" or "I am standing with you." We say, "You are in my heart and mind." It is a kind of cherishing.

Compared to various other attributes we assign to God, cherishing has received relatively little theological attention. Maybe this is because it is so easily absorbed into the broader category of love. Yet cherishing represents a specific kind of love or, better, a specific way of loving—one that inspires deep commitment and stubborn loyalty. It is about a merging of heart, mind, and will. All this may be difficult to put into words, but it is immediately recognizable to those who have experienced it.

Thelma gave this kind of love to her students. That is, she gave them a sustained cherishing, not mere mindless repetition. This is why she greeted every student with a hug and a rhyme—and it's why, even now, she can't seem to stop greeting them. Her students reside in her. And for those who accept this rarest of gifts, she resides in them.

"I love you little. I love you big. I love you like a little pig." "Does she always do that?" I asked the nurse.

"Oh, no!" she replied. "Only when she is very happy." The nurse paused. "But then again, Thelma has had a good life, and she's happy most of the time."

Perhaps this is what our Creator God feels through the gift of Son and Spirit. God feels an eternal joy, a joy that arises out of cherishing. And, like God in heaven, Thelma expresses her love to individuals as they pass through her consciousness. She keeps them in mind; they live in her. And she lives on in them—at least in those who have ears to hear.