

Seems like there's a pill for everything these days, if you believe all the drug commercials on television featuring smiling people who've benefited from better living through chemistry. Of course, side effects may occur, such as dizziness, dry heaves, twitching, temporary or permanent blindness, and convulsions leading to a coma. Rarely, but with prolonged use, other side effects may appear such as complete loss of bladder control, loss of feeling in the extremities and festering boils. Other than that, it's all good.

The commercials encourage people to "Ask your doctor about whatever drug their trying to sell," as if your doctor doesn't have enough trouble getting you to exercise, eat well, and take the pills he or she has already prescribed to you that actually keep you alive. But! Big news! A new breakthrough in research has produced a love drug that just might make you a more compassionate, a more loving, and a more empathic person than you are now. And although the Beatles famously sang, all you need is love, I think we can agree it isn't something we can actually buy. Or can we?

According to a website called the Guardian, love drugs could soon be a reality and used alongside therapy to help heal broken relationships. Scientists have discovered that the use of a drug that prolongs the effects of dopamine (the chemical that enhances reward or satisfaction on the brain) can make a person more compassionate and predisposed to equalize differences between people in social interactions.

In a study at the University of California at Berkeley and the University of California at San Francisco, 35 men and women visited a lab two times. Each time, they were given a random dose of either the dopamine-sustaining drug or a placebo. Then the researchers gave each person some money to divide between themselves and a stranger. The results showed that those who had taken the actual drug were more likely to share the money equally with a stranger than those who

had the placebo. Scientists believe that their findings could eventually lead to more unbiased social interactions among people by altering the chemicals in their brains -- which sounds a bit like something a James Bond villain would attempt on a large scale.

But really, do we need yet another pill, especially, one that makes us become what God created us to be in the first place? As Paul tells the Thessalonian church, "You don't need anyone to write to you [or he might have said write you a prescription], for you yourselves have been taught by God to love one another." In fact, in our second lesson this morning, Paul prays for the church: "And may the Lord make you increase and abound in love for one another and for all, just as we abound in love for you."

Love and compassion, it seems, are enhanced best by a relationship with God. In fact, Paul offers a formula for a kind of Christian kindness pill that requires no water to take other than the water of baptism. It has no debilitating side effects. It's the kind of love and compassion that's unleashed when people love each other in such a way that it cannot help but make us treat strangers as equals, and give our love and resources to them impartially as well.

The Thessalonian church had been ill-treated by the surrounding culture, just as Paul himself had been mistreated. Paul had come there after preaching in Philippi where he had been beaten and thrown in prison until revealing his Roman citizenship, and now the fledgling church in Thessalonica was experiencing its own trials on behalf of the gospel.

After his departure, Paul was clearly worried that persecution might cause a hemorrhaging of the struggling church but, miraculously, Timothy had just been there on a visit, and he returned to Paul with the "good news of [their] faith and love." Despite the apparent dis-ease of their situation, they had become inoculated by their love for God and for others and had been able to "stand firm in the Lord."

So, what was the chemical makeup of that kind of love and compassion for one another, especially for those who persecuted them? Here are some possible ingredients.

The first one listed would most likely be **Encouragement**. It's clear from his letter that Paul, Timothy, and others had been giving constant encouragement to the Thessalonians, not only encouraging them to stand firm in faith and mission, but also to persist in love no matter what. "You became imitators of us and of the Lord," writes Paul, "for in spite of persecution you received the word with joy inspired by the Holy Spirit, so that you became an example to all the believers..."

The key to cultivating the kind of love that withstands the virus of hatred is to imitate someone who is demonstrating that love authentically and compassionately to all; someone who encourages you by word and example. Paul spent time with the Thessalonians, sent others to check on and encourage them, and then wrote to them again with thanksgiving for the example they were now setting for others, both for their friends and enemies alike.

In order to have the love of God flow naturally out of us, we first need someone to show us what it looks like and to encourage our growth. Which begs the question, who might you imitate in their compassionate love for others, and for whom might you model that kind of love in return? Encouragement via imitation is a key to maintaining healthy disciples of Jesus Christ.

The next ingredient would probably be **Thanksgiving**. In fact, three days ago we were celebrating Thanksgiving Day with turkey and stuffing, mash potatoes and gravy, but thanksgiving is one of the key ingredients we need every day in order to become people of love and compassion. Paul thanks the Thessalonians "for all the joy we feel before our God because of you." The discipline of giving thanks to God, and giving thanks to and for others, leads us to see them differently. We are more likely to treat someone with love and

compassion if we know how much love and compassion we have received, just like we're more likely to be forgiving if we know how much we have been forgiven. Think of it as "thanksgiving therapy" that strengthens our ability to see others as God sees us.

The final ingredient would almost certainly have to be **Prayer**. Paul and his companions prayed "night and day" for the Thessalonian church, and, not just casually but "earnestly." No doubt they were praying earnestly for Paul, for Timothy, and the rest. Prayer is an essential ingredient for a life of love and compassion because it brings us before God on behalf of someone else. We ask God to act -- to strengthen, to encourage, to heal -- and then we go out and work for what we pray for.

We pray that God will "restore whatever is lacking" in the faith and wholeness of others, even our enemies. And, when we do so, we cannot help but be more disposed in compassion toward them. We pray that God might "strengthen [their] hearts in holiness" so that they may be "blameless before our God and Father at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all his saints"

If you take all of these ingredients and combine them together, you have chemistry that is much stronger than anything a scientist can manufacture with a mortar and pestle. In fact, some studies have shown that there's a direct connection between prayer (which includes thanksgiving and even encouragement as we pray for others) and the release of more dopamine in the brain that stimulates feelings of reward, satisfaction, and compassion.

When you read 1 Thessalonians you *do* get the idea that Paul is having a dopamine rush in thinking and praying about the Thessalonians. His love for them overflows in the letter. So, what would happen if we devoted ourselves to that kind of encouragement, thanksgiving, and prayer for the people we encounter every day, even those who may be hostile to us? After all, when Jesus told us to love our

enemies, he also told us that our doing so is one of the ultimate demonstrations of perfect love.

When we seek to walk the path of abounding love, it is also helpful to remember that the Lord is the source of our love. As Paul prays, “may the Lord make you increase and abound in love.” His prayer begins with an acknowledgment that true love originates from God. In other words, Paul is asking the Lord to actively work in the hearts of believers, enhancing their capacity to love. This implies that the ability to love others deeply and genuinely is a divine gift and not merely a human effort. Frankly, this means that if we are having trouble abounding in love, it could be that we’re having a tough time abounding in the Lord.

Science will keep trying to find ways to enhance our lives through better chemistry, but the reality is that some things just don't need a quick fix. Rather, they simply require some discipline and encouragement. And the side effects are awesome! So today as Advent begins and as we prepare to celebrate the birth of our Lord and savior, let us practice Paul’s advice to us this morning. Let us work on making encouragement, thanksgiving, and prayer, three ingredients of our daily life and perhaps eventually we will discover that we don’t need scientists to create a love drug to make us more compassionate and loving after all! And Thanks be to God for that. Amen.