What if love is more of a decision than a feeling? What difference would it make if love had little to do with feeling wonderful, with sex, with noble and tender romantic obsession? What if love were shown in deeds more than words?

Now celibate priest though I am, let me make it clear that I know love is complex; that there are different kinds of love - all holy, good, and filled with connection, energy and, yes, magnificent fearful power. Allow me to go record as saying I am profoundly in favor of love. Perhaps second only to priests, the lawyers in the gospels have a rough time with Jesus. It’s a lawyer this time who sets Jesus up to talk about love. Jesus’ answer should be surprising. Eros, philia, agape form a neat triptych but we all know it’s a boat load more complex that our ancient Greek forebears would have it ... indeed, it’s a lot more complex than the institutional Church would have it!

"I think there is no more misunderstood word than love. It means sex to some, thrill to others. Feeling wonderful to most. Love should fix things, change them, renew them. It ought to make us feel better about ourselves and the world. It must make life light and easy, a joy an ecstasy, bliss. As the song says, 'Love is all you need'" (Kavanaugh, The Word Embodied, 118).

Jesus two-part answer comes from Deuteronomy 6:5 and Leviticus (everybody’s favorite book) 19:18. The Shema, what every Jewish child in Jesus time learned, is not a shocker. The greatest commandment reads, "You shall love the Lord, your God, with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind." The shocker is the second half, "You must love your neighbor as yourself."

"The ordinances in the Book of Exodus are explicit enough on how love is exercised in human relations. We shall not wrong a resident alien" (119). Hmmm, maybe we better revisit that one! We shall not abuse widows or orphans. We shall not deprive people - especially poor people - of their safety, comfort, and dignity. We shall not treat people as creditors. Uncomfortable yet? I am.
But wait! There's more! Anyone who thinks love is a pleasant path, an easy way, should consult what Paul says about the "more excellent way."

What is love? Love is patience. Love is kindness. It is not jealous or conceited, rude or selfish. It does not take offense, nor is it resentful. It is always ready to trust, to excuse, and to endure whatever comes.

"Love, when we do it, is the eternal in us, what lasts in us. It is God, again made flesh (our flesh), in our reciprocation, our giving back. Love is ultimately an affirmation, a kiss to the universe freely given" (119).

"Feelings accompany the metaphysical and metaphysical fact of love, but they do not constitute it. The accompanying feelings can be of greatly differing kinds. The feeling of Jesus for the demoniac differs from his feeling for the beloved disciple [or Mary of Magdala]; but the love is the one love. Feelings dwell in us; but we dwell in love. That is no metaphor, but the actual truth. In helping, healing, education, raising up, saving, love is the responsibility of an I for a Thou. In this lies the likeness - impossible in any feeling whatsoever - of all who love, from the smallest to the greatest and from the blessedly protected man, whose life is rounded in that of a loved being, to him who is all his life nailed to the cross of the world, and who ventures to bring himself to the dreadful point – to love all” (Martin Buber, qtd. By Kavanaugh, 120)