

Love Sermon

Today is a day for us to consider love, that most enigmatic, mysterious, and mystifying element of the human condition.

Yes, big words for a big word.

Love. L-O-V-E.

Just four letters long, but a word that stirs up clouds of emotion, memory, experience, and hope in our lives.

A word that has been the object of poets, leaders, spouses, songwriters, and revolutions.

Because it can be defined in so many different ways, love challenges us.

In our culture, you can fall in love and fall out of love.

You can love someone but not be in love with them.

You can give love without being loved,

be loved and reject love,

be lovable and unlovable,

and even hate love and love hate.

If I asked each and everyone of you to describe love in your own words, we would likely be here all day coming up with a whole bunch of definitions, great and small.

In fact, a group of businessmen and women did just that, asking children to define love.

Eight year old Rebecca said, 'When my grandmother got arthritis, she couldn't bend over and paint her toenails anymore. So my grandfather does it for her all the time, even when his hands got arthritis too. That's love.'

Or four year old Billy said, 'When someone loves you, the way they say your name is different. You just know that your name is safe in their mouth.'

Or finally, 6 year old Chrissy, 'Love is when you go out to eat and give somebody most of your French fries without making them give you any of theirs.'

But for all the cute and true definitions we could come up with, we know, according to classic rock band Nazareth, "love hurts".

Love has a dark side to it – love can lead us to dizzying heights and dizzying lows in seconds. Love can fill us up and leave us hungry. Love can break our hearts. Love can even be fake, like this letter that I found on the internet:

Dearest Jimmy,

No words could ever express the great unhappiness I've felt since breaking our engagement. Please say you'll take me back. No one could ever take your place in my heart, so please forgive me. I love you, I love you, I love you!

Yours forever, Marie.

P.S., And by the way, congratulations on winning the lottery.

And so with all of this in mind, love in its joy and misery, let us dig in this morning to explore love, its meaning, and see how God might call us to love.

PRAYER

Well, what is love?

Theologians have pointed out, and perhaps you've heard it before, that there were three kinds of love referred to throughout the Bible.

Eros, Phileo, and Agape are all Greek words that would have been familiar to Jesus, Paul, and their contemporaries and describe three different kinds of love. d

Eros love is romantic love – the love we celebrate on Valentine’s Day. This is the love of beauty, attraction, fluttering hearts. This is the love of Song of Songs in the Old Testament, “Set me as a seal upon your heart.”

Theologian Raymond Brown also suggests that eros had a religious element to it as well. Eros love would have been the motivator for “people reaching out or up for the good they want in order to be more complete.” Eros love thus sees this great object, this beautiful thing or person, and desires it so that we in turn become more desirable.

But Eros love too has its dark side. The truth is, no one can control who they are attracted to, who they fall in love with – like Cupid’s arrow. And likewise, we can’t make anyone fall in love with us. Eros love is fickle – Eros love can flee us – Eros love can dry up, and if there is nothing left, then the relationship too withers away.

Eros love is what drives country singers to sing, like Texan Willie Nelson, “Maybe I didn’t love you, quite as often as I could have, and maybe I didn’t treat you quite as good as I should have. If I made you feel second best, girl, I’m sorry, I was blind. You were always on my mind.”

From Eros then, we explore Phileo love, brotherly love. This is the love of families and friends. This is the kind of love we often experience here at church – it’s the kind of love that gives and receives. If a church has phileo love, then it loves to spend time together. We love to Phileoship together.

Phileo love is about a sense of fondness or affection in your heart. There have been people in my life who, in an instant after meeting them, formed a fast friendship, while there are others, who might be the nicest people in the world, that just didn’t click. Likewise, I have friends with tight knits families who stay in regular contact, day by day, and others who may not talk to their parents for years on end.

Phileo love was used through the New Testament, especially in Jesus' commands for the disciples to love another.

But Phileo too can have its challenging side. A family can be so tight knit that outsiders feel unwelcome. Granted, most families are not on the lookout for new brothers and sisters, but the church, as a family, can do all of this too, getting so insular that when someone new comes along we never even notice them or bother to invite them to join us in conversation and mission. And remember, the church does have a mandate to go and make disciples.

Phileo has no place for Christ's command to love your enemies. Phileo probably prefers cliques and small groups with very little crossover. Phileo too can attract people who are like each other, because we are all attracted to people who are like us. Not that any of this is necessarily bad, it's natural, but gone too far, places like the church become unwelcoming to someone new.

From eros to phileo, the final kind of love we will consider is Agape. Agape is described in a whole bunch of different ways – unconditional love or parental love. This is the love that Paul is referring to in our scripture this morning. It's a harder kind of love to pin down, because it does not derive itself from pleasure, attraction, or emotion. Some theologians say it is a love of the mind.

In 1st Corinthians 13, we find a text that is familiar to most of us – a beautiful passage that is widely known even outside of the church. If you have been to a wedding where 1st Corinthians 13 was read, raise your hand. Yes, it's probably the most common wedding scripture in the Western world. And yet, this passage has nothing to do with weddings. This passage has nothing to do with eros love – it's not about couples or commitment or how to have a successful marriage.

It's about God's love.

The chapter is set in the midst of teaching and conversation from Paul to the Corinthian church about leadership, about gifts from God, about what it means to be a Christian community. The first few verses set the

gifts of the spirit, which the Corinthians were struggling with, in light of love.

If you can speak in the tongues of angels, if you have faith to move mountains, if you have the gift of prophecy, if you give away all that you have, even your life, and yet do not have love, you have nothing.

And then Paul goes on to describe this love.

⁴ Love is patient, love is kind, it isn't jealous, it doesn't brag, it isn't arrogant, ⁵ it isn't rude, it doesn't seek its own advantage, it isn't irritable, it doesn't keep a record of complaints, ⁶ it isn't happy with injustice, but it is happy with the truth. ⁷ Love puts up with all things, trusts in all things, hopes for all things, endures all things.

Beautiful words... but also frightening when you realize Paul was not just describing love, he was telling the Corinthians what it meant to be church.

Disciples pastor, Fred Craddock, in the People's New Testament commentary, says that a better translation would have more verbs in this passage. Love acts with patience. Love does deeds of kindness. Love refuses to be rude. In other words, all these nice things are not qualities of love - they are how love acts.

Agape love is like this – it's an unmotivated love. Whereas eros love depends on some object of attraction and phileo love needs a bond of affection, agape love confers goodness to the object loved.

Another way to understand it is from 1 John 4:10 – “This is love: it is not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son as the sacrifice that deals with our sins.”

Before we loved God, God loved us.

While we were yet sinners, Christ loved us.

We are not loved because of what we do or don't do – we are loved because God loves us.

This is unmotivated love – this is the kind of love that enables us to love our enemies.

An author once said - It is natural to love them that love us, but it is supernatural to love them that hate us.

Agape love is supernatural - a boundary breaking, hard to fathom, amazing thing that can only be a gift from God.

All of this returns us back to the challenge of this text - Paul saw this agape love as not some abstract idea but as a concrete way of life for early Christians to live in the world.

And if Paul thought that divided, messed up church in Corinth could do it, then that means Paul thinks every church, every Christian, even East Dallas Christian Church, is called to live this way too.

Wow.

Perhaps, though Paul's words are timely.

Perhaps, it is time for agape love to make a strong comeback in our culture.

Perhaps for too long, Phileo love has held sway in churches, and we've had way too much fun being together and not doing enough beyond our walls to give love to undeserving people.

Perhaps for too long we've let people think eros love is what life is all about – reaching for beautiful things and ignoring the fact that God created us in love and calls us beautiful.

And let me be clear – each kind of love has its place in our life. We need them all. They are all natural. And we must find ways to use each of them properly, wisely, and carefully. But it is Agape love, the love that is the very nature of God, that is the church's mission to share.

And it's the kind of love I believe the world hungers for.

What would be different about East Dallas if we lived into God's agape love more freely?

As a church, we do a lot of things well. We work hard at being a place open to diversity – open to diversity in lifestyle, thought, politics, and belief. If you had each of us share our different individual understandings and ideas, you'd discover we actually disagree on a lot of things as a community... But we know our unity doesn't come from those kinds of things but comes from Christ's invitation at this table.

Could we tell everyone who came through this door that we strive to be an oasis for anyone who has been battered and bruised by religion, life, and pain? Could we keep working hard at welcoming each other at God's table?

And last but not least, how can we proclaim that our God, the Creator of all life, loves each one of us by name before we can even think of praising Him, serving Him, or responding to Him? God is not a vending machine in the sky. God is not offering us a deal with a catch. God is not angry at us. God does not want us to fail. God loves us, for who we are and who we are still becoming. Each one of us has a friend who may need to hear the word of love during this week of love.

“Dear friends,” the first letter to John, chapter four, verse 11 says, “since God first loved us, let us love another.”

May we be channels of that love – may we pass it on to others – may we as a church grow deeper into God's love each and everyday. May we love as God loves. Thanks be to God.

I will close with this story as my invitation. A young man from North Carolina felt the call by God to go to Iraq after September 11, even as combat began. While in Iraq with other brothers and sisters in Christ, he worked hard to try to protect innocents – to protect hospitals, clinics, schools, and families – to be literal peacemakers. The time came for them to leave Iraq and as they left through the western desert, one of their vehicles had a terrible accident. Some passerbies picked up the injured and rushed them to the nearest town with a hospital, Rutba.

When the injured arrived, they were greeted by the town's doctor: "Three days ago your country bombed our hospital," he said. "But we will take care of you. Christian or Muslim, Iraqi or American—we take care of everyone." That he did, saving at least two of the team members' lives. When the young man asked the doctor what they owed him for his wonderful care he calmly replied, "You don't owe us anything. Please just tell the world what has happened in Rutba."

That young man came back home to North Carolina and started a Christian community called the Rutba house, where strangers are welcome, where all people – Christian, Muslim, Iraqi, American, Mexican, black, white, gay, straight, liberal, conservative, whatever – are welcome and treated with agape love.

Christ calls us today to know that God first loved us, and God continues to welcome us with open arms, no matter who we are, where we are, or what we have done.

As we stand and sing, I invite you to come forward and join this community as we seek to walk the way of Christ in this world.