

Topic: Love

Title: Who Do You Love?

Key Verses: 1 John 4:7-12

Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love. This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him. This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins. Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. No one has ever seen God, but if we love one another, God lives in us and his love is made complete in us.

Prayer:

Lord, may you be present in this message and in the reflection that results from it. I ask that you bless this time to our continued walk with you, our rock and our saviour. Amen.

Introduction:

Most of you know me as the resident student minister. But I lead a double life. During the week, I work full time as part of the team that manages a website called Canada.com. One of the coolest parts of my job is developing the community tools for the Canada.com network. We've got a site called communities.canada.com and it is all about building relationships, communicating with people, sharing pictures and generally having a good time. These types of sites are quite popular on the Internet. These community sites are referred to as "social networking sites", which is a fancy way of saying "community building". They foster a lot of great discussion and a lot of relationship building. I have a lot of friends that I have never met in person, thanks to the Internet. And, I have also been able to reconnect with a lot of friends that I haven't talked to in years, thanks to the Internet.

Speaking of social networking sites, who has heard of Facebook? I have an account on Facebook. Facebook is all the rage with the kids nowadays. Facebook is one of these "social networking sites". The thing that I find great with Facebook is that it allows so many people to communicate in such a convenient way. Facebook has this thing called a "Friend List" and it keeps track of how many people have granted you permission to have their name on your "Friend List". It's absolutely phenomenal how this feature has led to such incredible growth for Facebook, the company. Think about it: people love to collect things, and what better things to collect than friends! It's brilliant.

And recently, Facebook has come out with some new features. One of the new features is a thing called "Top Friends", which allows you to sub-categorize your friends a little further. Now, you've got your main friends list, but you can also give special status to some of those friends as "Favourites". By the way, for those that have already sent me a

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You can't tell me that these are all the same kinds of love. And you're right. When we talk about love, there are many different ways of thinking about love. There are many different categories of love, shall we say. Philosophers and theologians have thought long and hard about the different kinds of love and here's what the best and brightest thinkers could come up with:

When we look at these kinds of love, we can break them into three basic categories:

Eros = romantic love

Philia = friendship & family love

Agape = divine love

So, let's take a look at each one of these in turn.

EROS:

Eros is definitely the "I love the way he looks in a bathing suit" kind of love. Eros is the desiring and passionate kind of love. It's about sparks flying and heart rates going up. In a marriage relationship, eros can be a fantastic and beautiful thing.

The ancient Greeks described eros as that love between a man and a woman which is neither planned nor willed. Put another way, the Greeks saw eros as something uncontrollable. Eros is considered to be the most primitive kind of love. Because of its primitive nature, it can be seen as imperfect and misguided at times. It's been compared to the instincts of an animal. It's the type of instinct that we see all around us in popular culture today. People excuse their desires as something that is outside of their control. People blame everything else for their lack of willpower.

A well known evangelical Christian in the US was recently in the papers for his inability to control his desires. Ted Haggard is a married man and he came under fire for his extra-marital sexual encounters. This has been a difficult time for Ted Haggard. His family has suffered, and I'm sure still suffers today, from this difficult situation. The activity at the root of this is an example of eros, this passionate, desirable type of love.

The problem with eros is that it can sometimes be irrational. It can be destructive when pursued without considering the consequences.

Additionally, eros can be fleeting. Physical pleasures don't last forever. We all age. Our emotions change over time. There is something impermanent about eros. Even though eros has a beautiful and seductive side to it, it doesn't last forever.

But most importantly, we need to consider what eros represents. Desire and passion is about what we want. It is a selfish emotion based on our own wants and needs. In today's day and age, people tend to confuse sex and love. No more are relationships about loving that other person. Love is confused with lust. In these situations, people turn into objects of affection. Men and women become objects of affection instead of individuals that have feelings, emotions, wants and needs.

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leaves and the relationship tends to stagnate. Like a flower that is left untended, it withers and dies.

Relationships with co-workers fall into this category as well. Many times, we don't get to choose our co-workers, but harmony in the workplace goes a long way to making it more enjoyable. Thus, we have a vested interest in getting along with our co-workers. Thus, good business relationships tend to be one the benefits that come from getting along with one another.

Philia is the kind of love that many of us are most familiar with, as it is the kind of love that most of exercise most often. We interact on a daily basis with our family and friends. We appreciate those that are close to us. We interact with one another and we share the love. It's important to do this. In fact, some of us don't do this enough. We should do more of this. It's important to spend time with family and friends.

About six or eight months ago, my father was diagnosed with acute myeloid leukemia. Based on the research that we've done and what the doctor's told us, this condition will likely be fatal. The questions that can't be accurately answered are:

How will this impact my dad; and

What sort of timelines should we expect;

It's hard. Not knowing is extremely difficult. But I tell you, it's made my love for my father much more vivid. For me, it has stirred up my love for my father in such a vibrant and urgent way. And, for those that have experience with these kinds of emotions, I'm sure you'll be able to relate: These feelings of love that I feel are at least partly due to my selfish emotions. I don't want to lose my dad. I want him to be with me always. I don't want to lose him, or anyone else that I value in my life.

AGAPE:

Lucky for us, we have a third kind of love, agape. This is the kind of love that allows for reunions with loved ones in the future. God's saving grace ensures that we will see our loved ones again in heaven.

This is the love that God has offered us. It is divine love, which is an unconditional love. It has no strings. It expects nothing in return. It does not need love in return. It is simply love freely given. Agape is the word for love that is used over and over again in the New Testament. Whereas eros is worldly or material in nature, agape is divinely inspired and powered by faith.

To explain it quite simply, agape is unconditional love.

Agape is based on Jesus' sacrifice and our acceptance of this through faith. Agape comes to us from God. God wraps himself around us in his cloak of loving fatherhood. It is an intimate individual relationship with each one of us. God's love is unconditional. It is eternal. Love, to God, should be given to everyone in equal and universal measure.

God's love is meant for everyone. Remember Jesus' words:

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Mark 12:30-31 – the greatest commandment:

“Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength. The second is this: ‘Love your neighbour as yourself.’ There is no commandment greater than these.”

Loving the Lord with all your heart, soul, mind and strength transcends the physical nature of eros and the fleeting nature of Philia. Agape absorbs both of these forms of love and it builds on them, pushing for a complete, selfless, unconditional form of love that should be freely given to everyone.

This kind of love doesn't keep score. It doesn't discriminate. It doesn't check to see if the recipient is popular, cool, smart or funny. Agape is meant for everyone. I'm glad for this kind of love because I'm not popular, cool, smart or funny.

Paul's order, in 1 John 4 is as follows:

Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love. This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him. This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins. Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. No one has ever seen God, but if we love one another, God lives in us and his love is made complete in us.

We are to love one another in the same way that God loves us. This isn't just a physical form of love or a form of love based on shared benefits. It is a love based on pureness of intention and a caring and unselfish spirit.

Let's look at this in a bit more detail:

Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love.

Love comes from God. This love is divine love. Everyone who experiences love expresses it in a way that is pleasing to God. And, because you love, you also relate with God, because you're sharing the essence of God. You can't give what God gave you without interacting with God.

And further, if you don't love, then you couldn't possibly know God, because God is about love. And if you're not sharing love, then you're not right with God.

This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him. This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins.

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Alright... so, you want to know what love is? Well, here's how God showed his love to us. He sacrificed his one and only son so that we might live through him. This selfless sacrifice for the betterment of us is what love is about. Love is selfless. It is unconditional. It applies to each and every one of us. God doesn't expect something from us first. He gave it to us. Free of charge. All we've got to do is reach out and accept it. What a wonderful gift God has given us.

Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. No one has ever seen God, but if we love one another, God lives in us and his love is made complete in us.

And finally, because God loved us, then we must pass this on to others. We are obligated to share this gift from God. We can't just keep it to ourselves. We must get out there and spread this selfless, unconditional love that comes from God with who? With everybody else.

And when we share this love with others, God appears. God is with us when we love those around us. In loving one another, we become God's agents, effectively saying hi for God to those that need it.

I think that's incredible. When we love our neighbour, we are giving them a glimpse of the divine love of our creator.

But who should we love? Should we love those people that fall under the category of "Philia"? Is it enough to love our family, friends and co-workers? Or is there more to it than that?

Jesus said it is easy to love those that love you:
Matthew 6:43-45:

You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbour and hate your enemy.' But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven;

Matthew 6:46-47:

For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? And if you greet only your brothers and sisters, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.

But... is this possible? Are we able to love those that are against us? This is where the challenge comes in. Agape isn't easy. It isn't fair weather love. It doesn't come and go as your feelings change. Agape is unconditional. It doesn't judge. It doesn't categorize people into lists of cool, smart, popular or funny. Agape is consistent with all people. It provides dignity, respect and compassion to everyone. This is what God asks of us.

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I'll wrap up with a personal story of dignity and respect. When I was living and working in Toronto, I became friends with a guy named Larry. Larry panhandled a block from my workplace, just outside of the subway that I rode to work every day. For months, I would walk by Larry every day, not really acknowledging him. Larry became a familiar sight in the morning and at night when I would come and go from work. One day, I decided to stop and talk to him for a minute. I was curious to see what his story was. If nothing else, he was dedicated to what he was doing. I think he showed up for his work of panhandling on a more regular basis than some of my co-workers.

I was curious to know who Larry was, what made him tick. Over the course of six months or so, we slowly got to know one another. We'd say hi and bye each day, we'd occasionally stand and chat for a few minutes while I was on my way to work or on my way home to my family. Through conversation, he shared some of his life story with me and I shared some with him. I learned that he was making ends meet through panhandling and by working part time as a youth street counselor. He felt the need to dedicate some of his time to preventing kids from making some of the same mistakes that he had made.

I asked him what I could do to make a difference with some of the social problems that he was experiencing himself, or that he was witnessing in those kids that he visited on a regular basis. His answer summed up agape so well for me. He told me that just saying hi to people and making them feel like people was a good start. He said that just recognizing someone as a person and providing them with that level of respect made such a difference. It didn't cure their problems. But it gave them a sense of dignity and worth.

To me, that's an example of agape in action. Just recognizing someone and acknowledging them is important. Ensuring that everyone can contribute and that nobody is marginalized is part of God's plan. It's about encouraging dignity and respect in the lives of others.

It's ultimately about community. Loving your neighbour, regardless of who they are, what they do or why they do it.

I'm going to leave you with a question. Write it down and put it on your fridge or your bathroom mirror or somewhere that you'll see it on a regular basis:

What can you do this week to express God's divine love?

Let us pray:

Dear Lord, we thank you for your unconditional love. We thank you for the way that you embrace each one of us and instill in us a sense of purpose and value. We also thank you for the way that you work through us, encouraging those around us of their value in your kingdom here on earth. Your love is so rich, so pure and so comforting. We ask that you continue to bathe us in your presence and that you continue to guide us with your loving hand. We ask this in your name, Amen.