

More Than a Many-Splendored Thing

1st Sunday after the Epiphany – Color: White – January 9, 2005

Sermon Background Study

Scripture Passages (NRSV)

1 Corinthians 13:4-7, 11-13

⁴Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant ⁵or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; ⁶it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. ⁷It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

¹¹When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child; when I became an adult, I put an end to childish ways. ¹²For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known. ¹³And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love.

1 John 3:16-17, 4:7-11

¹⁶We know love by this, that he laid down his life for us—and we ought to lay down our lives for one another. ¹⁷How does God’s love abide in anyone who has the world’s goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses help?

⁷Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. ⁸Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love. ⁹God’s love was revealed among us in this way: God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him. ¹⁰In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins. ¹¹Beloved, since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another.

This week begins a new sermon series titled, “Loving for Life: A biblical perspective on love, marriage, and sex.”¹ Today and for the next four weeks, we’ll look at the Christian understanding of love, marriage and discipleship, habits of a healthy marriage, God’s plan for our sexual intimacy, and turning to Christ and each other when we hit the rough times.

“Love is . . . ”

Love is . . . what? That is the question for today. If we are going to get anywhere with this series, we have to begin with the biblical meaning of love. And this will not be easy for us. The gulf between the biblical and the secular understandings of love is so vast that it renders the word “love” nearly useless to us. For much of the world, love is all about romance and wonderful feelings. It is about that ecstatic experience of new love, of being “in love” which, as exhilarating as it might be, is no more than the light of a candle

Eros, Phileo, and Agape

If we really want to grasp the biblical perspective of love, we need to begin with the Greek word choices made by the NT writers.

Eros is a Greek word that has been taken directly into English. For the ancient Greeks, *eros* was the passionate love that desired the other for oneself. Often equated with sexual lust and fulfillment, the basic idea is that of erotic intoxication or ecstasy. *Eros* is never used by the NT writers. Paul could have used this word in his discussions of love and marriage, but he did not. This choice begins to point us in the biblical direction – love is never about the fulfillment of our own desires, regardless of how powerful or wonderful the experience might be.

Phileo (verb) is a Greek word that is a little more familiar than you might think. After all, Philadelphia is the city of brotherly love. *Phileo* carries the sense of relatedness, specifically, to treat someone as if they were one of your own people. For example, we sometimes treat someone as if they were a member of our family – that would be *philia* (the noun form). The NT writers use *phileo* a few times, but very infrequently. There is little theological significance to its occasional use (only about twenty times). *Phileo* is often used synonymously with *agape*, the NT word for love.

Agape is used about 250 times by the NT writers. Just as significant, when Greek-speaking Jews translated the Hebrew OT into Greek, they almost exclusively used *agape*. Why did they choose this word?

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¹It would be a mistake to think that this series is directed only at those of us who are married. We’ll see that that there is much here that applies to all our important relationships. Besides, who among us does not have a stake in marriage – our own marriages, our parent’s, our children’s, our sibling’s, etc.

compared to the brilliant sunlight that is God's love, a love to which God calls us. So we'll try to come to this topic with a bit of a blank slate. There are three keys to the biblical understanding of love: (1) love is a bond of total trust and commitment (2) love is about actions, not feelings, and (3) the best synonym for love is sacrifice.

Trust and commitment

Though there are many dimensions of love in the OT, including the romantic and sexual in the Song of Solomon, the dominant love theme is covenantal. God loves his people and the people are to love God within the bounds of a covenant that binds them in mutual obligation. Though the covenant is never devoid of passion, it is focused upon trust, high regard for each other, faithfulness, and obedience. We'll see next week that God comes to use marriage as a metaphor for this covenantal love. For example, the people are not to commit "adultery" against God by chasing after false gods. Seven centuries before Jesus, God would speak through his prophet Hosea of his love for his people in shockingly personal terms. There was simply no parallel in the ancient cultures.

Jesus and the NT writers built upon the OT understanding of love. Indeed, Jesus cleared up any possible confusion about this covenantal love. Love is total trust, total commitment - the neighbor whom we are to love becomes anyone in need, even (especially?) our enemy. And, as in the OT, this is no abstract love of humanity - it is about what we do. Authentic love calls us to the hard work of repentance and discipline, of forgiveness and caring.

Cont. from the Pg 1 Text Box

So why did the OT translators and the NT authors choose *agape* for love?

Agape was used very little by Greek writers in the ancient world. It was a weak word, lacking the power of *eros* and the warmth of *phileo*. Perhaps the best way to describe *agape* was "colorless." It just didn't have a lot of meaning - which made it perfect for the Biblical authors! No Greek word really meant what they wanted to say.

Because *agape* was a colorless word, its meaning to the original readers came solely from its context. The biblical translators and authors knew that the scriptural meaning of love, God's meaning, was far different from what the world meant by love. If they used *eros* or *phileo*, readers would bring to Scripture many misconceptions. But by using *agape*, this colorless word, Paul, Matthew, John, and the rest could shape the word's meaning to God's meaning for it.

So what, you might ask. Look at the verses for 1 Cor 13 on page 1. We have in our minds certain meanings of the word "love," whether it is romance or friendship or something else. We need to set all those aside and let Paul define "love" for us as he writes, "Love is patient . . . kind . . . not envious or boastful or arrogant . . ."

Actions, not feelings

Though, in keeping with the OT law, Jesus teaches that the two greatest commandments are to love God and neighbor, he actually doesn't throw around the word "love" very often. Instead, Jesus speaks of mercy, caring, kindness, and forgiveness. Jesus, and later Paul, constantly reminds the disciples that love is not about what we feel, it is about what we do. Are we patient with others? Are we kind? Do we resist the temptation to boast or envy? Do we even avoid being irritable toward others? (1 Cor 13:4). Understanding that love is about actions, not sentiment, makes sense of Jesus' teaching to "Love your enemies" (Matthew 5:44). Though we may not have loving feelings toward our enemies, we can still be merciful, caring, and forgiving. We cannot control how we feel, but we can control what we do - and God calls us to "do love."

Love as sacrifice

John cuts to the heart of this in 1 John 3:16: "We know love by this, that he laid down his life for us—and we ought to lay down our lives for one another." What the NT means by love is the cross. The cross is the concrete embodiment of love. God so loved the world that he gave up the life of his own son. Jesus so loved us all that he laid down his own life. If we want to know what love is, look to the cross. The essence of love is sacrifice. Love is self-giving, never self-seeking.² What might this mean in the context of marriage? More next week!

²from Richard Hays' *The Moral Vision of the New Testament*, 1996. For Hays, the three focal images of the NT are community, cross and new creation. Love is best understood as an interpretation of the cross.

Daily Bible Readings

(more on the biblical understanding of love)

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

<p>Day 1 Deuteronomy 6 The great commandment to love God. Note that God's love is seen in what God has done for the Israelites.</p>	<p>Day 2 Leviticus 19:9-18 What does it mean to love our neighbor? Here are some concrete examples from 3,300 years ago.</p>
<p>Day 3 Song of Solomon 3:1-5 A dream of love. The romantic and very personal dimensions of love between a man and a woman.</p>	<p>Day 4 1 Corinthians 13 Paul's entire poem</p>
<p>Day 5 Philemon Paul's plea, made out of love for this slave, to Onesimus on Philemon's behalf</p>	<p>Weekly Prayer Concerns</p>

Sermon Notes

Beginning today!! – A New Five-Week Teaching Series at 9:30 with Scott Engle in Wesley Hall

Biblical Perspectives on Love, Marriage, and Sex

We are not all married, but marriages matter to us all. In this series, we'll look at the Christian understanding of love, marriage and discipleship, habits of a healthy marriage, God's plan for our sexual intimacy, and turning to Christ and each other when we hit the rough times.

Winter Bible Academy also begins this week!!

**Information on classes and on-line registration is now available at
www.standrewccl.org**

Classes include: *The Balanced Life* (Sunday afternoon); *The Gospel of Luke: Jesus – Savior of the World* (Monday morning & Tuesday evening); *Why me, Lord?– The Book of Job: A study of faith and hope* (Wednesday lunch); *The Letter to the Hebrews: The final sacrifice* (Thursday morning); *The Gospel of John* (Thursday lunch); *Meeting Jesus: His life and times* (Monday evening); and *Beginnings* (Monday evening). Here are some comments from the fall 2004 classes:

"I would strongly recommend taking this and other Bible Academy classes to anyone – take any class, it will help you. . . . I am thankful to see these classes at long last!"

"I love the Bible Academy! I have learned more in the last couple of years than in the preceding 30!!!"

"This class helped me delve deeper into Scripture and gain a fuller understanding of God. It helped strengthen my personal relationship with Christ."

"The class has enabled me to grow in my faith in a way that I have never been able to in the past. My faith has made great progress. The class made me see that all or most of the church teachings are truly biblically-based."

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

What does Paul mean by love in 1 Corinthians 13? The heart of this poem lies in verses 4-7. Look back over those verses and take it slowly, one line at a time. N.T. Wright suggests that we reflect upon three things. First, reflect on the ways in which we see Jesus' qualities in these lines. You might even try reading it, "Jesus is patient, Jesus is kind . . . and so on." Then, you might reflect on how you see yourself in these lines; for example, "Scott is patient; Scott is kind . . . and so on." If you are like me, you'll have trouble getting very far without choking! Finally, you might reflect on the ways in which these verses work themselves out in practice. What does it mean to be patient? kind? Be specific.

A good biblical synonym for faith is trust; a good synonym for hope is confidence. And a good synonym for love is sacrifice. What thoughts come to mind as you reflect upon love and sacrifice? For some, it seems to open the door to abuse. There is certainly plenty of opportunity for a self-seeker to abuse a self-giver. But if we accept that the Bible points us to love as sacrificial and self-giving, what might this tell us about marriage or any other loving relationship?