

## *Growing . . . through Loving*

September 15, 2002

### Background Study

This is the sixth week in the eight-week sermon series exploring our vision for St. Andrew, which is that we are “to invite people into a growing relationship with Jesus Christ and one another through worshiping, learning, loving, and serving.” So far we’ve examined the invitation God extends to us all, the nature of our relationship with God as fully revealed in Jesus Christ, and our relationships with others in the community of faith. We’ve looked at our growth through worship and through learning. This week, we’ll turn to loving as a vital part of our lives as God’s people and as a means for our own growth.

*Key Scripture Passage – 1 John: 4:16b-21*

God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them. <sup>17</sup>Love has been perfected among us in this: that we may have boldness on the day of judgment, because as he is, so are we in this world. <sup>18</sup>There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear; for fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not reached perfection in love. <sup>19</sup>We love because he first loved us. <sup>20</sup>Those who say, “I love God,” and hate their brothers or sisters, are liars; for those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen. <sup>21</sup>The commandment we have from him is this: those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also.

*Love? Much more than affection!*

In our culture, “love” has become a word that is used so freely, to express so many different ideas and feelings, that it has become almost useless. I “love” God, I “love” my family, I “love” my dog, I “love” dark chocolate (ok, I do!). Because we use the word in so many ways, we are going to take a brief look at the biblical use of the word “love.”

As Kittel<sup>1</sup> notes, in the Old Testament, our love for God is focused on the delight and joy we find in God. Our love for God is our seeking after God himself. Our love for God is bound up with our obedience. Those who love God are those who keep his commandments (Deut 5:10), serve him, and walk in his ways (Deut 10:12). At the same time, our love for God is to be an internal matter, an affair of the heart (Jer 31:33). Much more than simply affection for God or others, love encompasses the whole person – our heart, soul, mind, and strength.

God’s love is focused on his people, as a nation or community, more than on any specific individual. God’s love for his people is manifested in his relentless pursuit of Israel despite their endless abandonment of him and the covenant. The story of Hosea gives concrete expression to God’s unfathomable, incomprehensible love for the people he has chosen! God instructs Hosea that he is to love and marry a whore, Gomer, and continue loving her, no matter what she does to shame and dishonor him. God loves Israel and Hosea is to love Gomer – regardless!

In the New Testament, Jesus builds on the Old Testament understanding of love but makes it completely unconditional. Our love for God represents total commitment and trust. Our love for neighbor is extended

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<sup>1</sup> Much of the material in this section is from Kittel’s *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* (abridged by G. Bromily)

to all humanity and cannot be separated from our caring for the marginalized in our society. Jesus even makes clear that our love for neighbor is extended to our enemies – all are included!

Luke tells us that Jesus was once approached by a lawyer who asked him what he must “do to inherit eternal life.” Jesus asked the lawyer what was written in the law and the lawyer replied, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself.” (see Luke Chapter 10) Jesus told the lawyer he had answered correctly. But of course, being a lawyer, the man asked Jesus “who is my neighbor?” Jesus replied by telling a story, the parable of the Good Samaritan. In this story, a Jewish man, lying injured by the side of the road, was refused help by a priest and then a Levite<sup>2</sup>, only to be helped by a Samaritan, who was the true neighbor. It is hard for us to grasp how shocking this story would have been to the good Jews listening to Jesus. It would be as if Jesus told the story in an Israeli café today, with an Israeli schoolgirl lying injured, refused help by a Rabbi and an Israeli soldier, only to be helped by a member of Hamas!<sup>3</sup> You see, the Jews of Jesus’ day despised the Samaritans, holding them to be little better than dogs. Jesus’ listeners might have been angered by the story, but they would have grasped the depth and universality of God’s command to love their neighbors.

Twenty years or so after Jesus’ death and resurrection, the apostle Paul wrote a letter to churches he had founded in Galatia, which was in modern-day Turkey. In much of this letter, Paul is quite angry with these churches because it seems that they have returned to the idea that they are made right with God by keeping the Sabbath or circumcising their male children. Instead, Paul writes, “For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision counts for anything; the only thing that counts is faith working through love.”

### *Love as Caring*

Our love is to be a practical love, a love not only of the heart, but of the hands! In the NT, the word most commonly translated “love” is *agape*. *Agape* does not necessarily connote warm affection.<sup>4</sup> Instead, it conveys sacrificial love, focused on acts of mercy and caring. In the above passage from 1 John, we are called to love our brothers and sisters and, indeed, this love for neighbor is bound up with our love for God – they cannot be separated. We cannot hate our brothers or sisters and still claim to love God!

In the first years following Jesus’ death and resurrection, the early Christian community in Jerusalem lived out the self-giving love to which Jesus had called them by caring for the needy, especially widows. Not surprisingly, as the community grew, this caring ministry grew also, putting ever-larger burdens on the time and resources of the twelve apostles. The apostles realized that, because of the time pressures, they were neglecting the preaching of God’s word in order to care for the needy. Knowing that their devotion to God and his word was bound up with their love for and caring of others, the apostles decided to enlist helpers to assume responsibility for the caring ministry. They chose seven men to lead these ministries, one of whom was a man “full of faith and the Holy Spirit,” named Stephen (Acts 6:5). Stephen, “full of grace and power” (Acts 6:8), boldly served God and proclaimed God’s mighty acts.<sup>5</sup> Stephen was the first Christian to be martyred for his faith, but his caring ministries are carried on today by the Stephen ministers at St. Andrew and elsewhere.

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<sup>2</sup> Priests served in the temple, the center of Jewish worship. Their highest duty was to offer sacrifices. Levites assisted in the maintenance of temple services.

<sup>3</sup> The shocking nature of this parable is from John Crossan’s, *The Dark Interval*. 1988. Sonoma, CA: Polebridge Press

<sup>4</sup> There is another Greek word, *phileo*, which more strongly carries the notion of warm affection for another. Yes, the Greeks have lots of words!

<sup>5</sup> Acts 6 and 7 tell us of Stephen’s ministry and his great speech before the Jewish high council which led to his martyrdom.

## Daily Bible Readings

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><b>Day 1</b> Leviticus 19:1-18 God instructs Israel on love as caring. See esp. v.18</p>	<p><b>Day 2</b> Isaiah 54:4-10 The compassion that is God's everlasting love.</p>
<p><b>Day 3</b> Luke 6:27-36 Jesus talks about loving those who are the hardest to love.</p>	<p><b>Day 4</b> 1 John 3:11-24 Loving in truth and action</p>
<p><b>Day 5</b> 1 Corinthians 13 Paul's great chapter on love - written to a very troubled church!</p>	<p><b>Weekly Prayer Concerns</b></p>

## Sermon Notes

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### Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. In the key scripture passage for this week, John writes that “God is love.” Our belief in the trinity – one God who has always existed in three persons – reveals that God is inherently relational, that God is inherently loving, that God is inherently a loving community of three persons. We, in turn, are created in God’s image. What might this say about the nature of the loving relationships we have with others? To put it another way, when we embrace the image of God within ourselves, how does this affect the way we relate to others?
2. When have you most experienced God’s love for you? When does it seem most real to you? At what times in your life have you most exemplified God’s love for you in your love for others?
3. In the New Testament, love is not a feeling or even an idea. It is the concrete expression of Jesus’ self-sacrificial death on the cross. “We know love by this, that he laid down his life for us – and we ought to lay down our lives for others.” (1 John 3:16) We look to Jesus’ life to see what love really is. True love for God and neighbor is an expression of our repentance, transformation, discipline, and sacrifice. How can Jesus’ example of sacrificial love transform our own notions of what it means to love others? How is your love for others seen in your own concrete actions? How is your love for God seen in your actions? Do we ask enough of ourselves or is our love limited to that for which we can find some extra time and effort in our busy lives?