

And the Greatest of These is...

1Cor. 13:1-7

Rom 13:8-10

Short series on faith, hope, and love. Or, hope, faith, and now love. We just heard that love is the greatest, so this deserves two messages.

Romans 13:8-10

⁸Owe no one anything, except to love another; for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law. ⁹The commandments, "You shall not commit adultery; You shall not murder; You shall not steal; You shall not covet"; and any other commandment, are summed up in this word, "Love your neighbor as yourself." ¹⁰Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law.

This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God!

I begin by reminding us that in the world in which Jesus lived and moved and had his being, and for a few centuries before and after, there were 4 words in the Greek language that we translate as "love" into English, and therefore 4 concepts or ideas of what love is and what love does. Jesus and all of the New Testament writers use one of these words, almost exclusively, and it's the last one of the 4 that I will describe here, as we are reminded of the "greatest of these" Christian virtues, which is love.

It's important for us modern Americans to distinguish the different kinds of love, because we tend to toss that word around as a way of describing how we feel about almost anything, from a person we know, to the weather, to our cat or dog, a movie or television show, to the chocolate that we consume. It's not all the same love, though, because we have come to understand love, mainly, as a feeling. But the Bible understands it in more nuanced and intentional ways. Let's look briefly at the 4 loves:

Eros, which is erotic love. This is being "in love," this is passion, hormones, sexual attraction, strong feelings. Today, in our culture, we tend to value eros as practically the highest form of love. It's everywhere, from music to movies. Eros *can* lead to commitment, and not just feelings, and it's wonderful to experience, right? God made us good, which includes the fact that we are sexual beings. Yay, God! That's a delightful part of being human. And yet, it is just one form of love.

There is **storge**—this is commonly defined or understood as affection. It's the kind of love you have for your dog or cat, or for a old pair of shoes or a pair of jeans that you have worn comfortably for years and you want to hold onto. It's the love that a child has for their blankie or a stuffed animal. But it's more than that. In classical Greek *storge* was also used to describe family affections—the

bond between parents and children, or between siblings. *Storge* is liking someone (or *something*) through the fondness of familiarity.

There is the word ***philia***, which is deep friendship love. This is the love between friends who may be considered as close as siblings in strength and duration. The friendship is the strong bond existing between people who share common values, common interests or activities and history together. These are usually long-time, committed friendships. These *philia* relationships are with people you genuinely like and want to be with; and you wouldn't have a problem saying "I love you" to that person.

The word *philia* occurs frequently in the New Testament, and is even used by Jesus to describe his relationship to his followers from time to time. Think about it: Jesus doesn't just love you because he is God and he is obligated to. He likes you! He is your friend. He calls you his friend.

Then there is ***agape***. That's the word that is used everywhere in the New Testament. *Agape* is unconditional love, no matter what the circumstances, whether or not someone likes another person (or maybe especially when they *don't* like another person!). When Jesus said, "Love your enemies" he uses this word *agape*. He doesn't say "*philia*" your enemies, or "*storge*" your enemies—

although if you can make friends out of enemies or develop some sense of affection for them, that's great; positive feelings and thoughts toward others can sometimes emerge when we choose to love with *agape*. But the word here means to seek the good of another, in spite of how we feel about them. It is love in spite of circumstances. This is what the apostle John affirms when he says "God is love." God is *agape*. We'll talk about that next week.

So, for the Christian church throughout history, *agape* is held as the highest form of love. This is love that is willing to sacrifice for another. This is band-of-brothers, band-of-sisters love, leave-no-one-behind kind of love. It's also the in-spite-of kind of love... in spite of faults and mistakes, in spite of feelings... I choose to seek what's best for another.

This is 1Cor.13 love—If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but have not *agape*, I'm just fingernails on a chalkboard. Love is patient, love is kind, and so forth. This passage is read at so many weddings one would think that it's *eros* that's being talked about here. Romance and strong attraction. But it's *agape* love, expressed as covenant, commitment. Love that says we belong to each other, whether that belonging is through wedding vows, or church

membership, or simply because of our common humanity. We belong to each other as fellow human beings.

In Romans 13, Paul sums everything up by saying love, agape, is the fulfilling of the law. The entire Jewish law, with not just 10 commandments but 613 commandments (a faithful Jew will tell us), is fulfilled with this one word: love your neighbor as yourself. One would think Paul, as a good Jewish teacher and former Pharisee, would say that *better behavior* is the fulfilling of the law. Or, *obeying all the laws* is the fulfilling of the law. No—love, agape, is the fulfilling of the law.

Love your neighbor as yourself. Now, this isn't easy to do, and it doesn't always go well in our attempts to love our neighbor. We're never going to do this perfectly—there will be mistakes and half-hearted attempts, and that's the grace we receive from God as we walk in faith. We need the Holy Spirit's help. *And...* we need to keep at it and not give up. Because we *do* get it right much of the time. And we get better at it with practice.

And, it would be worth examining how we really, truly love *ourselves*. How we see ourselves and think and act toward ourselves. Because somehow, tucked into this command to love our neighbors *as ourselves* is the assumption that we

will be gracious and compassionate with *ourselves*, that we'll be kind toward ourselves, and generous toward ourselves, and see ourselves as God sees us, with God's eyes of unconditional love. And that we will, then, in turn, love our neighbor in the same way. With graciousness and generosity; agape.

First, though, we need to become beloved! Many commentators say that love of neighbor actually *begins* with love of self. It's a place to start. There is something for each of us to think about.

When Jesus and the apostle Paul tell us that loving our neighbor is what it's all about, it's important to remember that our neighbors are not just fellow church members or our literal next-door neighbors, but also the people we come across in our day to day lives, even if we don't know them personally. Because Jesus reminds us that anyone in need is our neighbor.

Remember that the parable of the good Samaritan started with a question: "Who *is* my neighbor?" It was asked by someone trying to justify himself, and it's a boundary question: who am I *obligated* to love? And, therefore, who do I *not* have to love? And then Jesus tells the story of a person who loved another person in need along the road of life. And after telling the story Jesus turned the question around: "Who *acted as* neighbor?" Who was the neighborly person?

So, it isn't about who is or isn't my neighbor, as much as it is about my decision regarding what kind of person *I* want to be, or become, and how I will act.

One last comment first: love, agape—as a fruit of the Spirit, and as something that mirrors Jesus Christ and his life and love—is proactive. It's proactive, and not reactive. So, in that sense, love is not the same as simple tolerance. Now, realistically, sometimes all we can do is tolerate someone, initially; it's all that our ability will allow us to do in the moment. We exercise patience and acceptance, and that's important. Sometimes we shouldn't rush to love (“grrr, I love you, grrr”). It's hard to move toward someone in judgment, or anger. We may need time to sort ourselves out before moving toward someone in a decision to seek what's best for them.

That said, when we talk about agape, Christian love, we're not talking about tolerance here. God's people are not called to tolerate one another, or tolerate our neighbor. We're called to go beyond that. We're called to love, as Jesus loved, which is what makes a world of difference in the world.

Jesus, after he was raised from the dead and was about to send the Spirit, did not commission his people, saying, “As I have tolerated you, now you tolerate others.” That sounds silly, but that seems to have become a default mode of

existence, and it just isn't working for humanity. I'm not knocking tolerance; I'm simply saying it isn't enough.

Historically, tolerance has never been considered a Christian virtue, until quite recently. But it's not in the Bible, nor is it developed as a classic virtue by any of the great historic philosophers, *unless* it is combined with another classic virtue, such as... love! Tolerance is like a holding place we might need to go to for a while until we can get ourselves to the place of proactively working for the best of another person. But it isn't a place to remain. That's why it hasn't been considered a historic virtue, or landing place.

Because think about it: who wants to be tolerated?!? Can you imagine someone talking with you, and they look you in the eye and say, "I want you to know, from the bottom of my heart, I tolerate you." Who wants to be tolerated?

We're called to love, to seek the best for another, which is proactive. If all we're doing is just tolerating each other, then we will likely end up ignoring each other most of the time, and we'll retreat to our comfortable corners to hang out with people who are mostly like us (or who are at least less intolerable than others!). That is not a work of the Spirit or a fruit of the Spirit. The work of the Spirit is to bring unity where there are a lot of very different kinds of people! And

that takes willingness, it takes some work, and some sacrifice, and a decision to go beyond our feelings about a person or situation.

Therefore agape love will sometimes be uncomfortable for us, because love isn't just a feeling; it's an action that we take, as we take steps toward people, to love people we may not naturally feel like loving. If we're in-Spirited (inspired), though, then God helps us to get over ourselves and learn to love. And the feelings will often follow. We just need to take uncomfortable first steps.

Or comfortable ones. Sometimes we talk ourselves into how difficult it will be to act in loving and generous ways toward others, only to find out that when we take steps and do it, it's actually feels good. Mother Teresa: "Don't give til it hurts; give til it feels good!"

Here are two suggestions for action steps for us, as we learn to love:

1. What does loving yourself look like? In what ways are you already doing that?—make a list and affirm it. Then, consider and pray about ways you can be more kind toward yourself. For example, changing your self-talk and the chatter in your head. Try this: imagine observing yourself, and you have a thought bubble above your head, like you see in cartoons. What's in the thought bubble? It would be revealing to see

how we talk to ourselves, or about ourselves. What new talk can take its place, based on what *God* says about you?

2. Who needs love? Someone in your life, perhaps. Someone you don't know but see occasionally, or who comes to mind in prayer, or you happen to interact with in the course of your day