

Sermon — Love Is — 7-19-20

Central Church

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It has now been four long months since we locked the doors of the church and began to worship electronically from home. Four long months of social distancing, of economic challenges, of missing one another, of worrying about the health of friends and loved ones. It has also been a time of deep division and conflict in our nation, community, and even our churches. It has been a difficult time and, as I have tried to navigate it with you, I must admit that my sermons have been a bit more serious than usual. That is not a bad thing. There is nothing wrong with serious but one should not stay serious forever. So, I thought I would tackle something lighter in this next sermon series and look at what Paul has to say about love. We will be examining the opening verses of 1 Corinthians 13. Certainly the passage will not be strange to us. It is read at 8 out of 10 weddings. It may be familiar, but it is worth hearing again, so let me invite you to sit back and listen as I read what Paul had to say about love:

**If I speak in the tongues of men or of angels, but do not have love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal. If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have a faith that can move mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. If I give all I possess to the poor and give over my body to hardship that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing. Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It does not dishonor others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. Love never fails. — 1Cor. 13:1-8**

A few years back researchers asked a group of 4-8 year olds, "What does love mean?" Their answers amazed me. For instance, Rebecca (age 8) wrote, "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 is love."

Billy (age 4) explained that, "When someone loves you, the way they say your name is different. You know that your name is safe in their mouth."

Chrissy (age 6) illustrated love, saying "Love is when you go out to eat and give somebody most of your French fries without making them give you any of theirs."

Bobby (age 7) shared, "Love is what's in the room with you at Christmas if you stop opening presents and listen."

Finally, Jessica (age 8) —advises, "You really shouldn't say 'I love you' unless you mean it. But if you mean it, you should say it a lot. People forget."

Their descriptions really help me to understand love. Which is a good thing, because understanding love can be challenging. The problem is that we use the word "love" to describe so many different things. We say, "I love... my wife, pizza, football, my country, this church, etc. Love is used to mean so many things, in so many different situations, that we often struggle to understand what someone means when they say the word love.

The Greeks did not have that problem. The Greeks had four different words that we lump together in a single word, "love". When we read the word love in our Bibles we have no way of knowing which of the four Greek words has been translated love. The four words that we translate love are: 1) Phileo which means brotherly love, or friendship, 2) Eros which refers to passionate or sexual love; 3) Storge which is parental or family love; and 4) Agape. As a side note, when we read the word "love" in the New Testament it is probably referring to the word "agape". 92% of the time when we see the word love in the Greek Bible it means agape. Which is somewhat surprising since agape was not a widely used word in ancient literature. What does agape mean? Agape is selfless, sacrificial, unconditional love. Agape is what 6 year old Chrissy meant when she defined love as "when you go out to eat and give somebody most of your French fries without making them give you any of theirs." Agape thinks of the other first. Agape does not put conditions on love. Agape simply loves.

Agape is the type of love Paul was writing about in the scripture passage we read. Paul wrote: **Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It does not dishonor others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. Love never fails.**  
— 1 Corinthians 13:4-8

Over the next six weeks we will be looking at Paul's description of agape love, asking what would it mean for us to love in the way Paul described. But this week I would like to look first at God's agape love for us. After all, God's love is both the source and motivating power of our love. As John said in his first letter: **"We love, because He first loved us."** — 1 John 4:19

We love, because God first loved us. God loves us and wants nothing more than that we love him and others in return. Which means that there is nothing more important than love. If you read the verses leading up to our passage you will note that Paul was talking about the varieties of spiritual gifts. He spoke of the importance of apostles, prophets, teachers, miracles, healing and speaking in tongues. But then in 1 Corinthians 13 he cautioned his readers, noting that as important as all those gifts are, if they are not guided and driven by love then those gifts amount to nothing. Paul wrote:

**If I speak in the tongues of men or of angels, but do not have love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal. If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have a faith that can move mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. If I give all I possess to the poor and give over my body to hardship that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing.** — 1 Cor 13:1-3

Listen to what Paul is saying. He begins by saying that, without love, it does not matter how much we know. Hear that? We don't need more information. Indeed, we are drowning in information. We live in an age of exploding information. I recently read that up until the year 1900 human knowledge doubled every century. By 1950 it was doubling every 25 years. Today knowledge is doubling every year. (little wonder I struggle to keep up). We have more information than we know what to do with. But, have you noticed that we still have the same problems. The doubling of knowledge has not fixed what ails us. Why? Because what the world needs is not more information. Oh, we sometimes lament that if only we had more

information then we would know what to do. But our problem is not a lack of information. Paul reminds us that more knowledge is not the answer, love is.

Paul does not stop there. We sometimes blame our problems on the world's lack of faith. If only the world would believe in God. If only people obeyed God and were kinder, or better. If only we would give more, live more sacrificially, then the problems of the world could be fixed. I must admit that I have preached that. But Paul says, "No. Even if you have enough faith so as to move mountains, even if you give away everything you have, without love none of it means anything."

Paul is saying that our relationships are more important than our accomplishments. That is hard for me to hear. I am a doer. I measure my success by what I have accomplished. Now don't get me wrong. Paul is not saying that doing things is unimportant. Accomplishing things is good. But in the end all we do and all we accomplish cannot measure up to the importance of love. Because nothing is more important than love. Nothing is more important than love, but that is so easy to forget.

Personally, I find it easy to get all caught up in the things that we do as a church and forget why we do them. I get caught up in producing the best worship possible and getting it out to as many people as possible. Right now I am working with the worship team to get us set up to do live worship again, even as we stream it electronically. We are working to involve more voices in the music. I am trying to improve my preaching. Then there is the sewer project to be completed as quickly and reasonably as possible. On top of that there are our outreach ministries; our feeding program; our Fall classes. After all, we are called to reach people and make disciples and how can we do that if our programming and building aren't at their best? All those things are important, right?

Well, yes, but are they the most important? How quickly I forget what Jesus had to say about making disciples. Never once did he say that they will know we are Christians by the quality of our building, our programs, or our education. No Jesus said:

**"A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another. By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another." — John 13:34-35**

You see not only is there nothing more important than love, there is nothing our world needs more than the witness of people living out God's love. I am reminded of the old Burt Bacharach song. Bacharach wrote:

What the world needs now is love, sweet love  
It's the only thing that there's just too little of  
What the world needs now is love, sweet love,  
No not just for some but for everyone.

That is as true today as it was in 1965. Don't get me wrong. I am not saying that there is no love in the world. We have all experienced love and given love. The problem is that most of the love we experience is conditional love. Conditional love is love that loves if...

You know what I am talking about. I love french fries but only if they are fresh and hot, and if they are not? Well I don't love cold, stale, french fries. Having been a pastor for many years I

have heard any number of people say that they love their church but often their love is conditional. They love their church as long as it features their kind of music, as long as someone doesn't offend them, as long as it agrees with them about... and if it doesn't well then they find another church. We say "I love you", but we mean "I love you as long as you provide what I need, and if not..." Conditional love loves because of what it gets in return. And when it no longer gets what it wants then it doesn't love anymore. Maybe you have experienced conditional love. Maybe you have loved conditionally. Most love is conditional.

However, God's love is not conditional. God's loves us unconditionally, which is hard for those of us who have only experienced conditional love to understand. None-the-less, we are told that nothing can separate us from the love of God. God does not love us if. God does not love us when. God just loves us. God always loves us. God will never stop loving us.

This means that there is nothing you can do that will make God love you more than he loves you right now. God will not love you more because you read your Bible end to end. God will not love you more if you make a big gift to the church. God will not love you more if you pray more or serve more or obey more.

Nor is there anything you can do to make God love you less. No sin, no failure, nothing you have done or ever will do will keep God from loving you. Can you hear that? God loves us. God has always loved us. God will not stop loving us. God's love is not dependent on who we are or what we do. God just loves us. God loves us because that is who God is. John tells us that God is love (1 John 4:8). God's love is not conditional. God's love us without conditions.

Can you imagine what would happen if we actually believed that? What would happen if we began to realize that God is not waiting for us to earn his love? That instead God is passionately pursuing us with his love? What would happen if the word got out that Jesus was offering his love freely and without condition? That God loves us so much that he is willing to become one of us and die to show us the depth of his love? I love how Lewes Smedes put it when he wrote, "It may be a very bad thing that I needed God to die for me, but it is a wonderful thing that God thinks I'm worth dying for."

Think about that for a minute. You are worth dying for. I am worth dying for. Perhaps even more importantly, God wants to be with us, to simply love us. God is paying attention to us. In truth there are few things that make me feel more valued than having someone pay attention to me. In his book, *Love Beyond Reason*, John Ortberg has a chapter called, *Love Pays Attention*. There he writes:

"One of the great miracles of life is that God pays attention to us. This is partly why the writers of Scripture speak so often of God's face. This is the hope of the great priestly blessing that God himself taught the people of Israel. 'The Lord bless you and keep you; The Lord make his face shine upon you. And be gracious to you; The Lord turn his face toward you And give you peace.' — Numbers 6:24-26

"To turn your face toward someone is to give that person your whole-hearted, undivided attention. It is not the casual listening of a preoccupied mind. It is a statement: 'I have nothing else to do, nowhere else I'd rather be. I'm fully devoted to being with you.' THIS is the kind of attention God lavishes on us.

"It gets better. This blessing says that God will not only turn his face toward us, he will make it 'shine 'on us. The shining face is an image of delight. It is the face of a proud parent beaming while a child plays in her first piano recital. It is the radiant face of a bride as she walks the aisle to her groom. We can turn our face toward (pay attention to) anyone, with little effort. BUT our faces shine and beam and grow radiant only in the presence of those we love most deeply. And this, says the prayer, is how God loves us. God pays attention to us."

Have you ever wondered if anyone cares? Does anyone notice? Do I really matter? Is anyone paying attention? God is! Yes, God's love is unconditional and beyond reason. It delights in us. It pays attention to us. That is the story of the Bible from the creation of Adam and Eve, to the laws of Moses, to the birth and death Jesus, to the final victory of Revelation where we will sit with God at the heavenly table. It is the story of a God who loves each of us unconditionally and it is the kind of love he desires that we have for him and for others. But more on that next week as we continue our series on love is.

But one more thing before I close. I want to continue our new tradition of memorizing a scripture verse each week. If we gain nothing else from this time of COVID but that we have memorized a couple of dozen scripture verses and are applying the to our lives it will be a victory. What is our scripture verse for the week? What are we going to take with us, recite, memorize and ponder? It is 1 Corinthians 13:3:

**If I give all I possess to the poor and give over my body to hardship that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing. — 1 Cor 13:3**

Memorize that verse. And spend the week meditating on the importance of having love. And ask the question, who will God have me reach out to in love this week?