

Love One Another
LaGrave Christian Reformed Church
November 21, 2021 – AM Service
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1 John 4:7-12

This morning we come to the last of our one another sermons, and I've chosen to end with one of the most important one anothers, and that's love one another. So central and so important.

The call to love one another is found throughout the New Testament. You'll hear it in the passage I'm about to read. And if you read the rest of 1 John, you would find three more times where John calls us to love one another. Peter calls for it three times in his letters. "*Love one another deeply from the heart! Love each other deeply, because love covers over a multitude of sins,*" he tells us.

Paul calls for this one another numerous times. In Romans 13:8 he puts it at the center of our moral life. "Let no debt remain outstanding except the debt to love one another for whoever loves others fulfills the law." That's a strong claim! When we figure out this one another, we fulfill the law. Of course you know where Paul gets that from, right? Paul gets that from Jesus. Jesus sums up the whole law with love: love the Lord your God with all your heart and soul and mind and strength, and love your neighbor as yourself. In John 13:34 Jesus says it this way: "*a new commandment I give you that you love one another as I have loved you.*"

Then there's 1 Corinthians 13. There, Paul goes so far as to say, if you are going to pick any gift, if you are going to have just one Christian practice that becomes a habit for you, let it be love. Because the only things that endure in this world are faith, hope, and love, and the greatest of these - the greatest of these - is love. When we love we do something of eternal consequence.

So you see the call to love one another is absolutely central. Sometimes you hear Christians today saying they're sick of all this talk about love. "Love, love, love! I'm sick of all this love talk! It sounds mamby pambly and soft!" I know why they say those things, but love is not soft, it's world changing. And besides, like it or not, it's the center of the Christian moral life

Of course everyone wants love, not just us Christians. Everywhere you look people are talking about love, singing about love, writing about love. Everywhere you look people are pursuing love, trying to figure it out, trying to grow it and keep it. And it's a struggle. We may all want love, but we all get confused by it. We struggle to explain it and we struggle to do it well. Here's an interesting example of that. Back in 2014, a couple of Economists at Emory University in Atlanta did a study of 3,000 married couples. They found that the more money you spent on an engagement ring and a wedding, the higher the divorce rate. The more lavish the ceremony, the less certain the union. Here are the data: Couples who spend \$20,000 on their wedding ceremony are 46% more likely than average to get divorced; If you spend between \$10,000 and \$20,000, your risk is 29% higher than average. If you spend between \$1,000 and \$5,000, you are 18% less likely than average to get divorced. If you spent less than \$1,000, you are 53% less likely to get divorced. Brides who spent \$20,000 or more on their wedding are 3.5 times more likely to end up divorced than their counterparts who spent less than half that amount.

Now, the smartypantses among you (and you are legion) will remind me that correlation is not causation, and that's true. But still, something is happening here. People are spending tons of money on lavish wedding ceremonies, they're doing it as a way to establish their love, and it doesn't seem to be working. Just to be clear, before anyone who just paid for an expensive wedding gets mad at me, I'm not saying that an expensive wedding is necessarily a bad thing, lots of people have expensive weddings and do fine. But I am interested in the contrast between the picture of love painted by an expensive wedding and the heart of love revealed by John in our passage. What picture does John paint when he defines love? (read 1 John 4:7-12)

So, what's the ultimate picture of love held up to us by the wedding industry? A bride and groom looking young and gorgeous coming down the steps of the picturesque church into the backseat of the vintage car, surrounded by flowers, friends and sunshine. What's the ultimate picture of love held up to us by John? A man dying on a cross for the sins of the world. "This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins." Such different pictures. It's no wonder so many people are confused about love in this world.

To get at what's going on here, you've got to start with the Greek. When John talks about the love of God revealed in the cross of Jesus he uses the word *agape*. That's the same word for love used in every one of

the other love one another passages I quoted earlier. They don't just say love one another, they say agape one another. Agape fulfills the law. Agape is the most excellent way. Many of you probably know that the Greeks had other words for love. They recognized that not all loves are the same so they called a different sort of love, *Eros*.

What is the difference between these two kinds of love? Eros is a love that responds to beauty and excellence. Eros is love that sees something good or beautiful in the world, and then responds with its own offering of goodness or beauty. A picture of Eros would be a young man who meets a beautiful girl who lives in the same apartment complex as him. He's struck by her beauty and intelligence and so he asks her out on a date. He chooses a really nice place for the date, a place that he thinks she'll like, he dresses up nice and when he shows up at her door he brings her flowers, not roses – too forward – just some nice bright daisies for her kitchen. That's Eros. The young man sees beauty and goodness and responds with an offering of beauty and goodness.

Agape is different. Eros sees goodness and beauty and responds with an offering of goodness and beauty. *Agape sees need and weakness and responds to that with an act of sacrifice and blessing.* A picture of agape is something like this. A young couple comes to church every Sunday and they sit in the same place. An older widow sits just in front of them. They chat sometimes after the postlude. They are acquainted. But one fall, the couple notices that the older widow has been absent from church for a few weeks. They find her number in the directory and call her up. 'Hey, is everything okay? We miss seeing you.' Turns out she hurt her knee and can't drive. So the young couple says, 'We'll pick you up! You can come with us!' And so for the next weeks, while her knee heals, they take her to church, and they go out for coffee together, and the acquaintances become friends. That's agape. Eros sees beauty and goodness and responds with an offering of beauty and goodness. Agape sees need and weakness and responds with an offer of sacrifice.

Now, go back to the two pictures of love I mentioned after the Bible reading, the one from the wedding industry and the one from our passage. Now you understand why both these pictures can claim to show the ultimate picture of love, and yet be so different. The wedding industry is holding up Eros as the ultimate love. The beautiful young couple so joyful getting into the car in a storm of rose petals and cheers, their hearts bursting. John says, "nope. Romance and beauty are nice, but do you want to see the greatest love of all? This is love:" and he holds up Jesus dying on the cross. Jesus on the cross is pure agape. Jesus didn't come to us because of our goodness and beauty. Jesus didn't come to this world because he was attracted to our excellence. Jesus didn't come to this world because he thought it would be fun to hang out with us. Jesus came because he saw that we were a mess. Jesus saw that we were lost. Jesus saw that sin and death were tearing us to pieces. Jesus saw our need and weakness and he moved towards us with an act of sacrifice so strong it is able to make all things new. Pure, world-changing agape.

Both Agape and Eros are good loves. God created them both. But agape is better. Agape is foundational. And it's not just foundational to marriages; all healthy Christian loves are founded on agape. Family love, friendships, church community. Agape is the foundation of them all. If you are building the house of your life, Eros is like decorative trim. Eros is the crown molding in the dining room, the nice tile in the shower, the great light fixture over your dining room table. Agape is the roof trusses, the floor joists. Agape is the concrete foundation that goes down below the frost line, steady in all the heaving and all the storms. Eros is nice. Eros is even important. You wouldn't want to live in a house without any decoration or flair. A house without any decoration at all? No thank you. But you can't build your foundation out of decorative trim. The house won't last. There are lots of people who do try to build their life on Eros. My guess is, that's why some of those expensive weddings don't work out. Not everyone who has an expensive wedding is trying to build their life on Eros. But any person, any couple who idolize Eros will want the big wedding with all the trimmings. It's only later when they realize: that's not what makes a relationship work.

I was thinking about how foundational agape is, and I had a couple of thoughts this week. If this love one another is so central, if it really is, as Paul says, 'the most excellent way,' maybe this could be a way you could measure your days. At the end of the day you could look back on your day and ask yourself, "where did I do agape today? Where did I see someone's need or weakness and then move toward them with an act of sacrifice?" Can you look back on your day and see places where you did that? Some of you will have no problem doing that. If you're a parent taking care of young children, your whole day will have an agape shape. Bless you! For an empty nester, that might be harder to see. It's a good foundational question. It's a good

steering question. It's a good fulfillment question. If your days and weeks and months aren't filled with much agape, you won't feel right.

I was also thinking about our children. We spend a lot of time and a lot of money teaching our children life skills. We send them to school where they are drilled in reading and writing and math and science. We send them to sports camps and music camps we encourage them to train for their sport, to practice their instruments. All of this is structured and intentional. But if, as Paul says, 'love is then most excellent way,' if agape love is truly foundational, what are we doing to train our children in this love? I'm not talking about telling them intellectually what agape is (like I'm doing in this sermon.) I'm talking about what structured and intentional things are we doing to train our children to recognize need and weakness in the people around them, and then move towards that weakness with acts of sacrifice? You won't need to train your kids in Eros, society will take care of that. The wedding magazines, the fashion magazines, the home decorating shows, the romance industry – everywhere they go, Eros will be lifted high. What about agape? Are our children learning the cross-shaped rhythms of this most excellent way?

Why is this love so foundational? Why is it the greatest gift, the one eternal thing, the foundation? John tells us. Because God is love. It's not that love is some abstract principle that he happens to push on us. It's not that love is some standard that exists out there, and God endorses. It's who he is. If somehow we could stand in the middle of the swirling mystery of the Trinity, what we would find, what we would experience in the middle of that mystery is love.

That's why John says anyone who loves God, knows God. When we grow in the practice of agape, when we learn the practice of seeing weakness and need and moving towards it with sacrifice, we don't just imitate God, we grow in our knowledge of him. We grow in our relationship with him. That's interesting! John suggests an alternative way to grow in the knowledge of God. We know the conventional way. We grow in our knowledge of God by learning Bible stories and studying theology. John is saying when you love one another with his kind of love you grow in the knowledge of God. You can grow in your knowledge of God by learning your catechism. You can grow in your knowledge of God by loving your neighbor. "Whoever loves knows God." And not only that, when you learn the rhythms of his love, his power works through your loving acts! It's not just you and your little act of kindness, "God lives in you and his love is made complete in you." The transformative power of the cross works through you!

Have you noticed how many of these one anothers end up at the cross? Study these practices and trace them out in scripture and you will inevitably find yourself back at the foot of the cross, silent before the mystery of his love. That's because that's where God made this community, that's where the power for this community comes from. It's from Jesus. This is love, not that we loved God, but that he loved us. This all surpassing power is from God and not from us. A repeated theme in this series has been, you can do this! We can practice these things! We can live together in rich community. I don't say that because I have such faith in all of you, as wonderful as you are. I say these things and we hope these things because we have faith in Jesus. We say these things and hope these things because at the foot of the cross we realize that he won't let anything stop his love from changing us and changing the world.

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