

**Be Devoted to One Another in Love**  
LaGrave Christian Reformed Church  
July 10, 2022-AM Service  
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Romans 12:9-21

“Be devoted to one another in love. Honor one another above yourselves.” This is the part of the Holy Spirit’s renovating work that we will be thinking about this morning, and as we do we will find ourselves getting down into the fine texture of love, into its specifics.

Why do I say that? At first listen when Paul says, “be devoted to one another in love,” it might sound to us like he’s just repeating the opening words of the passage. You might think that “Be devoted to one another in love” is just another way of saying, “Love must be sincere.” But it’s not. The Greek words for love are different in each passage. As I mentioned in my first sermon, the word for love in verse 9 is *agape*. Agape is that big, gift love that comes straight out of the heart of God. It’s that word for love that Paul and the rest of the New Testament writers use to describe the self-giving, self-sacrificial love of God. Agape is that big overarching, cross-shaped love. Verse 10 uses totally different words for love. Philostorge and Philadelphia. These are not high concept words. These are kitchen table words. These words are as down to earth as they can be.

Philadelphia is a word you probably know because of the city. It means brotherly love. It’s a word for family love. Storge is less well known but really interesting. Maybe you know that C.S. Lewis wrote a book called *The Four Loves*. And in it he tried to describe Christian Love by focusing on the 4 Greek words for love found in the Bible. Those 4 are: agape, which I already talked about, eros, which is romantic love, or more broadly, a love that responds to beauty. Philia, which is friendship—the love between friends. Then the fourth biblical word for love is storge, which Lewis translates as affection. I want to talk about this fourth love today, because this is the only place in Scripture where this word is used. It isn’t a word Paul reached for often, so when he reaches for it here, he obviously has something specific in mind. What is Paul calling for when he calls us to storge?

As I mentioned earlier, C.S. Lewis says storge is a kind of affection. Others describe it as a kind of family love. Family affection. A kind of everyday love that flows from parents to child, from brothers to sisters. The Greeks even use storge to describe the affection a dog might have for his master. So Paul is not calling us to some high-falutin’ love here. Storge is a kind of everyday affection for the people who do life with us. It’s often an affection for what is quirky in another person, an affection for the thing that makes the other person who they are. It’s a very personal love, it’s usually an attachment to the particularities of a person that develop over time.

Let me be specific. My mother in law passed away last November. We loved her deeply and we miss her. One of the things we loved about her was her quirks. She had some really endearing idiosyncrasies. I talked about a couple of them at her funeral. Whenever you came into the house, if she was home alone, she would call out “Yoo Hoo!” It was a thing she did. Every time I came into her place and she would yell “yoo hoo,” it made me smile.

She also had a thing for rain bonnets. Wherever she went, Lois Dykstra had a rain bonnet in her purse. There were usually a couple stuffed in the glove box of her car. And if she was out and about, and there was a hint of moisture in the air, if there was even the rumor of a chance of a possibility of a sprinkle, she would wrap that rain bonnet around her head and go out to meet the world. Now-and please forgive me for saying this mom-but nobody looks good in a rain

bonnet. It's like wearing a shower cap in public. It's not a good look. So we would all laugh affectionately at mom when she would put on a rain bonnet, we would gently poke fun at her, and she would laugh with us. But she would keep wearing the rain bonnet.

Whatever we may have said at the time, we loved it when mom wore those rain bonnets. We had a lot of affection for those rain bonnets. And that love, that affection we had, is storge. There's nothing sacrificial in this love. So it's not agape. It's not a love motivated by beauty—the rain bonnets were not beautiful. So it's not eros. It was a love based on affection for the person. It's a love based on the everyday affection for the people who do life with us. That's storge.

Here's another way to think of it. I said in my first sermon in this series, that at funerals, families start to cry, families get emotional when they share stories of agape love, because that love is so central, and so formative. People also tell stories of storge love at funerals, but those stories are the ones that make us laugh. Like you did at the rain bonnet story. In our verse, Paul is calling for this kind of love to live in God's people. "Be devoted to one another in love." Or as Eugene Peterson puts it in the Message; "Be good friends who love deeply." Or "love each other in all your quiriness with family affection."

One of the essential components of storge is time... This kind of affection only lives between people who spend enough time together that they know each other's idiosyncrasies and learn to love them. It's only when you've dwelt with one another for long period of time that you know their quirks and experience them as endearing. When someone laughs at our quirks and we laugh with them, that's a sign that we are really close. When the Holy Spirit blows among this community, the Spirit is creating the kind of community where we are comfortable with one another at that level. Now obviously this church is too big for all of us to know each other at that level, but the Spirit is trying to create some of that kind of familial affection among some of your brothers and sisters.

Why is the Spirit creating storge? I mean, joking with your mother in law about her rain bonnet is fun, but is there a holy purpose in it? Is it really important? Is there anything sacred about this light-hearted fun? Yes, I think there is. Because this level of personal connection isn't just fun; it is the ground for trust and intimacy. When you dwell with someone so long that you not only learn their quirks, but start to have affection for them, you are close indeed. You matter to each other. You trust each other. You value each other. This kind of closeness is the ground of trust, it's the ground of loyalty. It's the ground of honesty.

It's even the ground of healthy conflict. Years ago as a staff, we went through Patrick Lencioni's little book, *The Five Dysfunctions of a Team*. One of the interesting things he said in that book was that unhealthy work teams never have conflict. They never fight. It's always harmonious. Why is that unhealthy? Because normal people have conflict. If you are never willing to disagree with your coworkers, it's a sign that you don't trust each other enough to be honest to each other's face. But when you've developed a kind of community of deep affection that even sees each other's quirks, you have an environment where you can be honest, you can disagree, and still hold onto each other.

Healthy churches do a lot to nurture storge. Healthy Christian community should include lots of storge. That's why churches need fellowship committees. And those fellowship committees should plan things like church picnics, and Klondike bars after the morning service in the summertime, and family fun nights, and bowling outings, and game nights. And churches should have softball teams and golf leagues as well as Bible studies and prayer meetings. Because the Holy Spirit is at all of those things building storge. Storge isn't noble like agape. It's not beautiful like eros. But it's an important part of what the Spirit is building in us.

Which brings us to the second part of Paul's instruction for the community. "Honor one another above yourselves." To get at this, let's look at the word honor, which is at the center of this exhortation. Honor is a word that has to do with status and value. When you honor something you give it high status and you praise it, and you give it your attention. Who are we trained to honor and pay attention to in our society? Ourselves, mostly. We are always worried about our honor. We don't think of it in those terms, but we are worried about where we stand with people. If you get up here and sing a song or do a reading in front of these people, what would you be thinking of when you sat down? 'How did I do?' 'Did I read well?' 'Did I sing okay?' 'Did I play a whole bunch of wrong notes?' In our fallen state our minds always go to our own status and our own honor. You speak up at the board meeting and afterwards your mind immediately goes to self-evaluation. 'Did that sound okay? Did I sound like I knew what I was talking about, or did I look like a fool?'

Preachers deal with this too. We have our own form of this. When you start out preaching in a new place, you are eager for people to like you and accept you, and so you are always worried about how you are doing. 'Did that work? Did that connect? Am I doing okay?'

But when you've been doing this a while and especially when you are in a congregation where you start to know the people you're preaching to, something happens. As you write the sermons and as you preach them you think less and less about your own performance, and more and more about the needs of the people in front of you. You're writing and you think to yourself, 'I want to say something to her loss. I want this to help him in his pain. I know he's completely exhausted, maybe this will encourage him. I know that young person is cynical about the church, maybe this story will help change that.' You start thinking less about 'how am I doing,' and you start to think more about how your congregation is doing. You honor them above yourself. The self-focus never goes away because preachers are still sinners, but you can feel it fade into the background.

Here's the interesting thing. If you are always focused on how you are doing, if you are obsessed on your performance, your honor, preaching will be a chore, a burden, a drag. Even if people think you're great. Even if your church grows like crazy, focusing on your own performance all the time will crush your spirit. But when you start honoring others, when their needs and worries and hungers get bigger in your mind, preaching becomes easier, lighter, more of a joy. This dynamic is true in all human work. If you are spending most of your life in a job or a task where you are constantly worried about your success and your own honor and position, it will crush your soul. But if you are working to bless others, to give them joy, to bring them comfort, to lift them up. If you're thinking about their honor before your own, you will love what you do and feel energized by it.

We all know this is true. You don't have to be a Christian to know this and feel this. If you are not a Jesus person and you happen to be sitting in this sanctuary, you know that always being worried about your own honor and your own performance is soul-killing. You also know that losing yourself in love for another human is exhilarating. What I want you to see and what I want us all to see is that that's all because of Jesus. We were made to honor others before ourselves. We are made to be creatures who aren't thinking of ourselves, but who lose ourselves in the joy of others and the beauty of others. Like a musician lost in the music, like a child lost in a game of tag with her friends during long recess, we are meant to give ourselves away, to honor one another above ourselves.

And that's who Jesus was. Who did Jesus value, and who did he honor? Jesus honored and valued children, stopped everything he was doing to hear their stories and bless them. Jesus

honored lepers, where everyone else moved away in fear, he touched them. Healed them. Jesus valued tax collectors and sinners, went to eat at their homes even when he knew everyone else would condemn him for that. Jesus honored and valued prostitutes who fell at his feet looking for a new way. Jesus valued and honored you. He honored and valued you so much so that we went to the cross, a place of absolute dishonor and shame. But he endured the cross, scorning its shame, so that you could be saved, so that that generous joyful other oriented life could live in you.

So, my friends, be devoted to one another in love, honor one another above yourself, and let his joy live in you.

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