

The Real Deal

A sermon by John Strommen on I John 4:7-12 July 15, 2018

Let us love one another because love is from God.

In this is love, not that we loved God but that God loved us.

If we love one another, God lives in us.

God is love.

Those are just a few sound bites from our text today, which delivers the powerful message that love originates with God. It is not generated within us. All we can do is receive it from love's source and pass it on. This is a very Lutheran idea, too. Priority is given to God's action, not ours. We only participate in God's action.

The love that comes from God is called *agape*' love in the New Testament. *Agape* means self-sacrificing love for the sake of the other. Let's look at three different qualities of agape love that distinguish it from how our world defines love.

First, agape love is **unconditional**. Many people think that for God to love me, I better prove my worth to God, I better love God first. This would be a conditional love. God would say, "I will love you *if you meet my conditions*." One of the powerful messages of I John is that God's love is not something that we elicit from God with good behavior. In truth, God loves us first, regardless of what our response will be. And so, love which comes from God is not *quid pro quo*: you scratch my back and I'll scratch yours. True love is unconditional. God loves us no matter what. We as humans are not capable of loving this way, although we can experience it somewhat with the people we love most. Only God's love for us can free us to participate in such a love as pure as this.

The second quality of agape love follows from its unconditional nature. **It is for everyone** - even our enemies. How someone has treated us in the past has nothing to do with whether we love them. But how is it possible to love someone who hates you, who has done you wrong, who wishes ill upon you? Love comes from God's perspective, and God's perspective is that every life matters, especially the ones that kicked around in this world. Every life has value because God created them and desires life, goodness, health and wholeness for them. In our lives, we are called to echo this love. You love someone not because you like them or because they give you perks of some kind. You love them because they are a creature of God and are therefore of great value. None of this means you don't hold them accountable to laws, to justice, and the like. You do, but always undergirded by love.

Verses like these and others underscore how different this kind of love is than how the world defines love. Often for we fallen human beings, there is a restrictive circle around love: love is reserved for your kin and tribe – your people, however you define that. As we are commanded to love with a love that God first gave us, we are called to love those who are different from us, those who are not in our tribe,

or religion, or whatever group is other than ours, for they are clearly our neighbor, as the parable of the Good Samaritan made clear.

We currently live in a time when a tribal fear and hatred have been enflamed, where many are urging even Christians to essentially regard the proverbial “other” not with love but with suspicion and contempt. When we love with a love that comes from God, then we care about individuals and families of all ethnicities and faiths. We seek their well-being and encourage them. This is not a question for us. As the Old Testament made clear and Jesus made abundantly clear, we are blessed to be a blessing for all the families of the earth, to love the stranger and sojourner in our midst. Do we ask questions and vet people? Of course.

So, God’s agape love is unconditional, for everyone, and, third, it is **benevolent action**. And here is where our world really distorts the meaning of love. For most people, they quickly accept a definition of love as a feeling, epitomized by romantic love. Now, don’t get me wrong, the feeling of love for someone, whether romantic or the love of a friend or family member, is a gift from God, and God wants us to delight in the feelings we have for those we love. But here’s a potential trap that dumbs down love: if love is a feeling that gives us pleasure of some kind, or if love is based on the benefits I get from love, then love can easily be about *me*. I love someone because of *what they give me*. Potentially, then, I may pay less attention to what that person needs or what’s best for them. Then it’s not really love. For instance, that person may want to change and grow for their own sake, but I might not want that because it could affect what they give to me. Then I might try to control them. Ever see that happen in relationships?

Agape love is not about the benefits for the one who loves. It is about the benefits for the one who is loved! There is no better example of this kind of love than in the classic story, *Beauty and the Beast*. In this story, the Beast lives under a curse because he has acted cruelly to someone in need, casting her aside, disregarding her need because she was of no use to him. But the curse the Beast lives under affects more than him. He has in fact put everyone in his household under this curse, a curse that has changed him from a handsome prince to a hideous monster while the household servants have become objects – a clock, a teapot, etc. When we fail to love, indeed we put a curse on others, as we render them as objects who exist for some purpose according to my interests, rather than as subjects who are to be loved.

Well, as most of you already know quite well, *Beauty and the Beast* is a morality tale, and the curse can be broken, but only if the Beast can learn how to love, a love which must be reciprocated. The Beast imprisons a beauty named Belle and she eventually draws out his humanity and ability to love. She, too, develops feelings for the Beast. Everyone in the household – from the Beast to Cogsworth the clock to Miss Potts the teapot and more – all are waiting for Belle to declare her love for Beast, and vice versa. They are waiting anxiously, too, for they only have a small window of time to resolve this curse or it will last forever.

That brings us to a crucial moment in the story, when Belle's father is in a crisis and needs Belle, and this sets up a most painful decision for the Beast. It is a decision that establishes whether he truly loves or not. In a way, we might say, that God intended.

(film clip)

And so it goes. If one truly loves another, in the *agape* way, then one will not calculate what is in my best interest, but what is in my beloved's best interest? For Belle, it was to go to her father. For the Beast, if he was thinking of his own interest, it would be to keep Belle captive and not let her go so that she would declare her love to him. He let her go, he took a risk, but he also truly loved. And he was rewarded in the end, for it was not lost on Belle that the Beast truly loved her when he let her go. This kind of love changes people, doesn't it? She was able in the end to save him with her love and the curse was broken. So the Beast had been made whole by a love that was bigger than self-interest. He was primarily interested in the well-being of his beloved. He freed her and was freed himself – freed to love.

So *agape* love can include feeling – and often does – but it is not feeling. We can love even when we don't feel like it! That's because love is action on the other's behalf. It's something we do. *Agape love* is an *intentional commitment to benevolent action*. God became a human person and subjected himself to the worst horrors of human sin and brokenness all because he wanted to save us from the folly and doom of our blind self-interest. This is a gift, pure and simple, because, as our text reminds us, God is love. That's who God is. And so, as we ponder what this gift is, we are invited into a new kind of freedom – a freedom where we no longer wonder about our status. We are saved by love. We no longer worry about how to tip our lives toward our own interests. God will provide what we need. We are then free to love. Love God and love neighbor. We have been freed from ourselves.

It is an incredible truth that the greatest power in the universe is love, for it is love in the end that is more powerful than hate, than despair, even than death.

So as you leave this place today, consider what it means for you to love those around you, near and far. How do you act in the best interests of your neighbor, as Luther urged us all to do in his interpretation of the Ten Commandments? Remember, the commandments are about proactive love: helping our neighbor, encouraging our neighbor, putting a charitable construction on his actions, speaking well of her. You are free to do this, and you are also commanded to do this, because it is this very love from God that has given you life! Amen.