

## Love One Another

Once again Kara has found an interesting image to go with this morning's text [**bulletin image**]. What do you see here? It's my sermon title . . . with a number sign in front of it . . . which is otherwise known as . . . what? A hashtag. Which is a term from current day social media, including Twitter and Instagram. In social media, if someone's post includes a hashtag, it will automatically be sorted with other posts having that same hashtag. In other words, to put a word or phrase in hashtag form, like this, it is a way of saying, "this is important" (at least to some people). It is hot news. It is something you'll want to pay special attention to. Thank you, Kara, for passing this hashtag on!

So I finally did the math [**1 John 4:7-12**]. The word love appears in this morning's passage thirteen times in six verses. Which is 2.16 times per verse. Giving this specific passage the highest concentration of the word love in the entire Bible!

It's definitely one of the more common words in our daily lives. I wonder how many times a day any one of us speaks the word love, or one of its derivatives. "I love this sunshine; don't you?" "I love orange juice for breakfast." "I love that hymn; it's one of my favorites." (Hopefully you can all say that about at least one of this morning's hymns.) And of course, we sometimes say these words: "I love you." We say it to our spouses. We say it to our kids, or parents, or other family members. We say it to our closest friends. There are surely no three words in the English language that are more important or profound than these. [**Hashtag: I Love You**].

You've probably heard before that in the Greek language, there are several different words for love. There is *eros*, which refers to, we might say, romantic love, or quite literally, erotic love, sexual love. There is *philia*, which is the kind of love shared between friends and family. For example, the word "**Philadelphia**" means literally "the city of brotherly love." Between the two of them, words based on either *eros* and *philia* surely account for the majority of ways in which we use the English word love every day.

But there is a third word for love in the Greek language: the word *agape*. (By the way, of the thirteen appearances of the word "love" in this morning's passage, all of them are based on the word *agape*.) We could define *agape* very simply as "God's love." [**agape=God's love**]. But *agape* is far from simple.

We could further define *agape* as love that is based on evaluation and choice. It does not come naturally. We have to choose it. We could even define *agape* as "sacrificial love," as self-giving love.

So let's see, when two people meet and "fall in love," what kind of love is that [**drawing of two stick figures, with heart in between**]? Is that *agape*? More likely it's a combination of *eros* and *philia*, romantic love and familial love or friendly love. When those same two people love each other so much that they decide to get married, what kind of love is that? It's most likely still a combination of *eros* and *philia*. The kind of love that we feel. And if, heaven forbid, they decide after being married for a few years that they've "fallen out of love," [**stick figures with heart crossed out**] or that they no longer have that wonderful, glowing feeling of being in love, we're still very likely talking about some combination of *eros* and *philia*. But, if they decide that they're going to stay together anyway [**stick figures, heart**], to keep working on their

relationship, and if they continue to say to each other “I love you,” even when they don’t necessarily feel that love, then we’re talking *agape* love. The love one must choose. Difficult love. Sacrificial love.

*Agape* love, by the way, is also the kind of love parents have for their children. At least when they’re at their best. To say “I love you, my son [or daughter]” is to say I will do anything for you; I will give my life for you. I choose to love you.” It’s the kind of love, in other words, that God has for his children. For us. When we read, in **John 3:16**, “for God so loved the world that he gave his only son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life,” that’s *agape* love. **[picture of God hugging world]**

We find essentially the same words in **1 John 4:9**: “God’s love was revealed among us in this way: God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him.” And then the next verse expounds and expands on that [**1 John 4:10**] “In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins.” God’s love for us, in other words, is sacrificial love.

The very first word of today’s text, the word “beloved,” **[beloved highlighted]** reminds all of John’s readers, which now includes us, that we are loved by God. *Agape* love. Sacrificial love.

Because we are God’s beloved, because we are loved by God with *agape* love—difficult love, sacrificial love, the love one must choose—what should our response to that be? Well, we are supposed to love God in return, right? At least that’s what one would expect here. God first loves us, so we should love God in return. According to Jesus, it’s the first and most important commandment. But that’s not what John says. He skips the first commandment, and goes right to the second. He says that because we are God’s beloved, we should love **one another**.

The Greek word is *allylous*. And it is without a doubt the second most important word in this passage (second only to the word *agape*). The very first phrase in Greek is **ἀγαπητοί, ἀγαπῶμεν ἀλλήλους** (“Beloved, let us love one another.”) The lexicons all say that *allylous* is known as a “reciprocal pronoun.” (Okay, whatever! ☺). Remember that a pronoun can be either the subject or object of the verb, and in this case it’s the object. John is saying that the object of our *agape* love is supposed to be one another. To say it is “reciprocal” means that it goes both ways. I love you and you love me. Or rather, I choose to love you and you choose to love me. Even when it’s hard.

But again, what kind of love are we talking about? If it’s not *eros*, or romantic love. Couldn’t it be plain old *philia*, the love of friends? Wouldn’t that be enough for the members of a church to share with one another and to feel for one another?

No, that would not be enough. John says it must be *agape*. Because that is how God loves us.

And again, what is this kind of love like? What does it look like? For this, we can turn to the Apostle Paul, and to the passage known as 1 Corinthians 13. [**1 Cor. 13:4-8a**] In this passage, Paul is talking very specifically about *agape* love. And he says this: It is patient (that alone makes it hard!); it is kind. *Agape* love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. (It’s getting harder and harder, isn’t it?) *Agape* love does not insist on its own way. It is not irritable or resentful. It does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. *Agape* love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things; endures all things. *Agape* love never ends.

Paul must just as well have added: “Oh, by the way, *agape* love is completely impossible.” Which would have been partly true. John would add, and in fact did add, that without God, *agape* love is impossible. This kind of hard love is only possible with God. Let’s go back to 1 John 4:7 [**1 John 4:7**], where John says, very explicitly, “Beloved [that is, we who are loved by God with *agape* love], let us “*agape* love” one another, because *agape* love is from God; everyone who “*agape* loves” is born of God, and knows God. And then in the next verse [**1 John 4:8**] he adds: “Whoever does not “*agape* love” does not know God, for God is *agape* love.” And then in verse 11 he adds (or really, repeats): “Beloved [he says it again], since God “*agape* loved” us so much, we also ought to “*agape* love” one another.” (Which remember is the Greek word *allylous*.) And then let’s jump to verse 12 [**1 John 4:12**]: “No one has ever seen God; if we love one another [if, not when], God lives in us, and his love is perfected in us.”

I’m going to talk more about “perfect love” next week. But needless to say, perfect, *agape* love is only possible with God’s help. It certainly doesn’t come naturally. We have to very consciously (and conscientiously, and intentionally) choose it. And we have to work at it. It is hard. It is sacrificial. *Agape* love means putting the needs of others before one’s own. It even means a willingness to die. (Like I said, it does not come naturally to human beings. Because by nature, we are selfish, “me first” creatures.)

So what do you think—are you—are we—bought in? Do we want to be part of a church and a community that loves one another with reciprocal, *agape* love? If so, then we better pray together.

God of love, help us to love one another with *agape* love. We would ask you what it looks like . . . but you already have shown us, especially through Jesus. So we ask instead that you give us the strength—and the determination, and the will, the commitment, the power—both to choose it, and to do it.

Amen.