

A Love That Is Not Thirsty

I Corinthians 12:31-13:13

Rev. Jeff Chapman ~ January 9, 2011 ~ Faith Presbyterian Church

✘ ✘ ✘ ✘ ✘ ✘ ✘ ✘

And now I will show you a still more excellent way.

If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. If I give away all my possessions, and if I hand over my body so that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing.

Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

Love never ends. But as for prophecies, they will come to an end; as for tongues, they will cease; as for knowledge, it will come to an end. For we know only in part, and we prophesy only in part; but when the complete comes, the partial will come to an end. When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child; when I became an adult, I put an end to childish ways. For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known. And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love. (I Corinthians 12:31-13:13, NRSV)

✘ ✘ ✘ ✘ ✘ ✘ ✘ ✘

Not long ago somebody gathered together a group of children and asked them what love means. I want to share some of their responses with you this morning.

8-year-old Rebecca said, "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."

Bobby, age 7, said, "Love is what's in the room with you at Christmas if you stop opening presents and listen." That's not bad.

Tommy, age 6, answered, "Love is like a little old woman and a little old man who are still friends even after they know each other so well."

7-year-old Chris said, "Love is when Mommy sees Daddy smelly and sweaty and still says he is handsomer than Brad Pitt."

Nick, also age 7, said, "Love is when you tell a guy you like his shirt, and then he wears it everyday." I like that. That's the sort of love a guy can really relate to.

Lastly, Karl, age 5, said, "Love is when a girl puts on perfume and a boy puts on shaving cologne and they go out and smell each other."

Once again, we're reminded, aren't we, just how much we can learn from children.

Now, if we really want to know about love, perhaps the place we ought to look is God's Word. And of all the places in the Bible which talk about love, can you think of any passage which more beautifully and truthfully captures the essence of love than the one we just read together? These are words which hold treasures only a lifetime could begin to unlock.

Paul begins the passage with this poignant reminder: there is nothing more important in life than love. You can speak like an angel, preach like Billy Graham, possess the knowledge of Einstein, serve like Mother Teresa, have the faith of Abraham. You can go and give away every last dime you possess. For a great cause, you can even give away your very life! You can do all these things, but if you do them without love, they all add up to zero. If you do not have love, your life is absolutely bankrupt.

That's what Paul says here. And in doing so he is merely echoing what Jesus has already taught us. The greatest thing to which any human being can give his or her life, Christ said, is loving God with total devotion and loving others as we love ourselves. In the end, love matters most.

Having made this clear, Paul, in the following verses, anticipates our next question. "If this love is so absolutely essential," we ask, "then tell us about it. What exactly is this love like? Show us true love so that we'll know it when we come across it!"

It's a great question. For as you know, the word love is batted around all over the place these days. A man I know says the following two statements with equal conviction. I *love* the San Francisco Giants. I *love* my wife. Same exact word used to describe both his relationship with a baseball team and his relationship with his soul mate. He can't possibly mean the same thing, can he?

Our one English word for "love" is exceedingly overused in our day. We ask it to carry far too much weight. The ancient Greeks knew better. They knew only a fool would try to describe his feelings for his sports team using the same words he just used to describe his feelings for his children, or his wife, or his God! So in their language, the language of the New Testament, the Greeks came up with at least three words for love.¹

The first word was "eros". It's where we get our English word "erotic." And though eros isn't limited to sexual desire, sexual desire does help us get at the meaning of this sort of love.

A woman meets a man and finds him beautiful and pleasing. As she comes to know him, her admiration for him deepens. Not only is he physically attractive, she finds herself also captivated by his inner strength and character. So naturally she wants to be with him, to possess him as a partner. For he is the one she imagines can fulfill her deep desires, both sexually and relationally. By possessing one so beautiful and worthy, she, in turn, believes she can be made to feel beautiful and worthy herself. You date the most beautiful person around and you begin to feel pretty good about yourself.

That is eros love. Eros is a love which seeks to fulfill a desire in me to be worthy, valued, beautiful.

¹ The following two resources were very helpful in understanding and defining these three types of love. Earl Palmer, *Love Has Its Reasons*, (Waco, Texas: Word Publishers, c. 1977). Fredrick Buechner, *Secrets in the Dark*, (San Francisco: Harper Publishers, c. 2006).

We all know this love well. We see it in our desires for the beautiful and pleasing in this life, whether people, or possessions, or power, or work, or status, or reputation. Whenever we reach out to grasp that which we find attractive in hopes that by possessing or consuming that thing we will have our own deep desire for value or purpose fulfilled, when we do that we are loving with eros love.

Now eros, in and of itself, isn't a bad sort of love. It does, however, have some serious limitations. For one, eros love never fully satisfies because the thing we try to possess in hopes of fulfilling our desire for value, never quite delivers the goods. The young and beautiful lover grows old and wrinkled. And finally dies. The children leave home. The new house or car loses its luster. Over time the job, or status, or image doesn't satisfy like we thought it would.

This is why people who think eros love is the only sort of love there is are always jumping from bedroom to bedroom, marriage to marriage, job to job, high to high, purchase to purchase. And tragically, if eros is the only love they ever pursue, they will do so for the rest of their lives. For again, eros love never fully satisfies.

The second word the Greeks used for love was "philia". This is where we get the name Philadelphia, the city of brotherly love. Which is ironic if you've ever attended a sporting event in Philly where pretty much everything *but* brotherly love is on display!

Nonetheless, that's what philia love is. It's brotherly love. It's the natural and instinctive love we all feel for our own families, our own nation, our own race. And just like eros, it's a love that all of us know well.

Often times at a funeral you'll hear somebody get up and say, "He loved his family so much. You know, he always loved his country." And it's funny, we say these things as if they are great accomplishments when, in reality, they are not. For again, most everybody loves like this. Some of the most wretched and cruel people in history loved their own families and their own nations. It's just the natural thing to do.

Now, the reason why we all love like this is because we all desire to be included. For while eros love seeks to fulfill a desire to be worthy, *philia love seeks to fulfill a desire to belong*. And when I come to identify with a family, or a nation, or some other collection of people who are in some way like me, then I have found a place to belong. I fit in. I am not alone.

Philia love, like eros love, is a good sort of love. But also like eros, it has its own set of limitations.

One of the downsides of philia love is that it always has to draw boundaries. I love these people because they are like me. I *don't* love those people so much because they are *not* like me. Philia creates in-groups and outcasts. So much so that it is rarely, if ever, extended to people unlike us, people towards whom we do not naturally feel affection or affinity. This means that while philia love creates devoted family members and patriots, it also is powerless to do much of anything about racism, or classism, or sexism, or all the other ways we divide from one another, even despise one another, because of our differences.

Now both these first two types of love, eros and philia, share one key thing in common. Namely, both of them are thirsty. Both of them are driven by the desire to fill some emptiness, some need, some hole. Whether that be the desire to be worthy, or the desire to belong, both eros and philia are trying to fill some emptiness in life.

For this reason among others, neither of these two words worked very well in describing the love that Jesus, and Paul, and the rest of the New Testament writers wanted to describe. So they chose another word. In fact, most

every time you see the English word “love” in the New Testament, including all through I Corinthians 13, it is a translation of a third Greek word for love.² Many of you know it already. The word is “agape”.

Now, of these three words, agape was by far the least frequently used word by the Greeks when they tried to talk about love.³ Loosely translated, agape means “good will.” When the Christian writers stole it, however, they expanded its meaning in radical ways.

Specifically, the defining characteristic of the agape love we read about in God’s Word is this: *agape love does not go out to seek to fulfill a desire but, rather, agape love flows out of a desire which has already been fulfilled.* In other words, while eros and philia thirst, agape simply overflows.

Think about it this way. If I am a person who, regardless of my circumstances, already feels completely worthy, then I will feel no desire to go seek anything else to make me feel worthy. I no longer need a spouse, or children, or a new car, or great job, or a good reputation to bring value and worth to my life. In the same respect, if I am a person who, at all times and at all places, knows that I absolutely belong and am forever included, then I no longer need to go around drawing boundaries any longer. I don’t have to worry about establishing my little clan. Even apart from my family, even apart from my nation, I still know that I have a place to belong.

You see, when I come to a place where I know ultimate worth and belonging I am then free to love with agape love. For now I no longer need, or want, or thirst. I’m full. I’m satisfied. I’m overflowing. I’m free to give. I’m free to let go. I’m free to sacrifice, to sacrifice even my very life. Since there is absolutely nothing I need from you, I am now free to simply give myself away to you. Do you follow me?

This is why agape love is often described as unconditional love. In other words, if you are loved with agape love it means that you are loved no matter what. No matter who you are. No matter what you do. Whether or not you return this love. Because the one loving you needs *nothing from* you. That person just loves you. That person has just decided, irrespective of who you are or what you have done, to always seek what is best for you.

This is the love Paul wants us to know. And to make sure we understand what this particular sort of love is really like, Paul goes into painstaking detail here to describe it for us. Beginning in verse four, he lists 15 different characteristics of this agape love. He wants to make absolutely sure that his readers understand exactly which sort of love he is talking about here.

Agape love, he begins, is not edgy or chomping at the bit, anxious that it will not get what it so badly needs. No, agape love is patient because it *already has* everything it needs.

Agape love is kind; it always thinks more of others than it thinks of itself.

Agape love never envies or boasts. It doesn’t strut around like an arrogant peacock. It is not desperate to possess what it does not have. No, agape love is content with what it has, where it is, what others think.

Agape love is never rude. It doesn’t barge in where it isn’t wanted. Instead, it always waits for an invitation. In fact, it never goes forward without one.

² The word philia is somewhat regularly used by the biblical writers. See passages like Matthew 10:37, John 16:27, Revelation 3:19. The word eros, however, is never used in the New Testament.

³ I imagine this was because this was a love that they rarely, if ever, came across.

Eros love and philia love tend to insist on their own way. In other words, they think of their own needs first. They're so thirsty they can't help it! Agape love never does that. So it never flies off the handle when things don't go its way. No, agape love is never irritable.

Other kinds of love keep score. All the time they are keeping a record of wrongs. Agape love, however, knows nothing of resentment. In freedom, rather, it forgives and makes peace. It never remembers, much less rejoices over, the misfortune of others.

Agape rejoices in truth. And why shouldn't it? There is nothing to hide, nothing to conceal, no secret which, if revealed, could put it in jeopardy.

In the end, agape love bears all things; it can endure any insult, any injury, any disappointment. Agape love believes all things; it always looks for the best and never hopes to find the worst. Agape love hopes all things; it never looks back but always forward. Agape love endures all things; it keeps going to the end, no matter what.⁴

No wonder the Greeks hardly ever talked about this kind of love! For where in the world does one even find love like this? *Who* in the world loves like this? Only one person. Agape love, of course, describes the love of God.

Follow me here.

The God of the universe, the God we read about in scripture, is one God, *the* one God, who in eternal unity exists in the three persons of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit – the Trinity. This reality of God is, and likely always be, a great mystery to us from our human perspective. It is, nonetheless, a reality. God, though one, is also, by nature, a community.

This means – stay with me here – that at the very heart of God, in the very nature of God, we see three persons – Father, Son and Spirit – who continuously and eternally love, and adore, and defer to, and rejoice in one another. The Trinity is characterized, then, not by self-centeredness but by mutually self-giving love.

Now, what I don't want you to do right now is to sit there and try to understand the nature of the Trinity. This is ultimately, I believe, one of those realities of the Christian message which we must mostly take on faith. You and I will never be able to adequately understand or explain the nature of our Creator. And really, is it not just human arrogance that makes us imagine we should ever expect to!⁵

What I want you do right now is to not try to *understand* the Trinity but to accept the reality that God, as Father, Son and Holy Spirit, is, by nature, a community of love. God is, by nature, by definition, love. And not only love, but a very particular kind of love. God is agape love. Overflowing love. Self-giving love. Love which does not seek to consume or possess, but which seeks to give and sacrifice, even to the point of death. God is love that simply is, like sunshine or falling rain.

This means – please stay with me here – that God's love *for us*, in the end, has absolutely nothing to do *with us*. In other words, God does not love us because of who we are. Or because of what we do, or can do for God. Or because of what we say, or build, or accomplish, or change, or pray, or give, or profess, or believe. God simply does not love us *because* of anything. God simply loves us. Since God *is* love, God can do nothing but love.

⁴ I'm indebted to two resources for insights into these 15 characteristics. Eugene Peterson, *The Message*, (Colorado Springs: NavPress, c. 1993). William Barclay, *The Letters to the Corinthians*, (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, c. 1956).

⁵ I'm indebted (always seems like I'm indebted!) to Tim Keller for some of the language and wording here. See his brilliant chapter on the nature of the Trinity in *The Reason for God*, (New York: Dutton, c. 2008), chapter 14.

I have to tell you that this was a stunning revelation to me this week. You see, for years now I have been telling my own kids that God loves them, which is absolutely true. But I've been telling them that the reason God loves them is *because* they are his children. *Because* they were made in his image and thus are, in some way, like God. *Because* they are beautiful in his eyes. For these reasons, I've told my kids, God loves you.

Some of you, I'm sure, have said similar things to your own kids.

But now I see that's not quite right. For in truth there is *nothing* in us, not even the fact that we were made in God's image or the fact that we are God's children, that leads God to love us. *Nothing* makes us worthy of God's love.⁶ God does not love us *because*. God simply loves us. He just does.

When we get this truth into our heads and into our hearts, then there remains no room left for us to imagine that God loves us because we are lovable. Even a little bit lovable! No! None of the glory sneaks our way. All the glory, instead, goes to God! All of it.

Of course, this love of God is not an idea or a movement. This love, rather, is a person, a living person. That means this love does not come to us through knowledge, but through a relationship. Specifically, the agape love of God for us comes most fully to us through a relationship with the person of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, who came to earth, and lived, and died, and rose, and reigns, and did it all out of love.

Fact is, when Paul wrote these timeless words about agape love, he wrote them to extend to us an invitation into this relationship of love, an invitation to place our confidence in this Jesus, in this God, who loves us no matter what. It's an invitation because God's love never forces itself on anybody. It is only received.

Writer Fredrick Buechner once wrote, "Of all powers, love is the most powerful and the most powerless. It is the most powerful because it alone can conquer that final and most impregnable stronghold which is the human heart. It is the most powerless because it can do nothing except by consent."⁷

I don't have time to dissect them in great detail, but in the final verses of this passage, verses 8-13, Paul ends by urging us to understand that there is no better decision we could make in life than the decision to embrace this love God has invited us to embrace.

For one, Paul says, God's love is absolutely permanent. All sorts of other things, even prophecies and knowledge, will pass away. But not this love. Even time and death are powerless against it.⁸

Also, this love is faithful. One day the love of God will make all things complete and satisfy all desires. Presently, Paul says, this reality only looks like a fuzzy image in a cloudy mirror. But one day we shall see face to face. One day we shall know this love fully. One day we shall know this love is fully for us!

Lastly, not only is this love of God in Christ permanent and faithful, it is also supreme. There is nothing greater than this love. Not even faith and hope, Paul says, are as great as God's love!⁹

⁶ See Psalm 14:1-3 or Romans 3:9-20.

⁷ Frederick Buechner, *Whistling in the Dark*, (New York: Harper & Row, c. 1973), p. 53.

⁸ See Romans 8:38-39 which tells us that nothing can ever separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus.

⁹ William Barclay wrote, "Faith without love is cold, and hope without love is grim. Love is the fire which kindles faith and love is the light which turns hope into certainty."

Once a person comes to know and understand this love which God has for us, how could he not accept it? How could she not embrace it?

Can you understand that we are thirsty, thirsty people? We long to know that we have worth, and value, and beauty. We ache to belong, to be included. But we run around our whole lives going after the sorts of love which will never completely satisfy this thirst. But in Christ, in the agape love of God, we find a love, the only love, which can fill us, and satisfy us so that we find ourselves, now overflowing, finally able to also love in a way that no longer seeks to take, but only to give.

Yes, Jesus wants you to love God with all your heart, all your soul, all your mind, all your strength. Jesus wants you to love your neighbors as you love yourself. He wants us to love with agape love. But if we try to love others, even God, like this without first realizing that we are *already* loved like this, all our efforts will only lead to despair. You see, agape love never flows from us. It only flows through us, through us from the one who loves like we, on our own, never could.

Before I close, I want to share one more quote with you from a child. When asked what he thought love was, seven-year-old Billy had this to say, "When someone loves you, the way they say your name is different. You just know that your name is safe in their mouth."

"When someone loves you your name is safe in their mouth." Only a child could say something like that. Something so right. Something so true.

If, by the grace of God, you and I can come to place our confidence in this agape love which our God, in Christ, has for us, if that happens then there will come a day, maybe even sooner than we realize, when we will come face to face with our Father in Heaven and we will hear him call us by name.

And when God says your name, I have to wonder if there will be something about the way he says it that finally assures you, once and for all, you are safe, and have always been so.

Amen.

✘ ✘ ✘ ✘ ✘ ✘ ✘ ✘

The Next Step

A resource for Life Groups and/or personal application

- When you were a child, who did you feel loved you the most? How did you know that you were loved by that person?
- Read I Corinthians 12:31-13:13 again. What first strikes you about Paul's words here?
- In your own words, define love.
- Do you ever find yourself able to love another regardless of who they are or what they do and without expecting anything in return? Why or why not?
- Why does God love you?

- It's been suggested that we can never even begin to love like this until we place our confidence in the reality that we are, in fact, already loved like this by God. What do you think about that?
- A writer named Fredrick Buechner once wrote, "To say that love is God is romantic idealism. To say that God is love is either the last straw or the ultimate truth." What do you think he was getting at?
- In verses 4-7, Paul lists 15 different characteristics of this kind of love (i.e. agape love). When you hold up these characteristics to your own life, which one are you most lacking these days? How would you like to grow in that area?

Further Scripture Readings for the Week:

- Monday:** I John 2:28-3:10 - Children of God
- Tuesday:** Romans 3:9-20 - Totally unlovable
- Wednesday:** Lamentations 3:1-24 - Faithful God
- Thursday:** Romans 8:28-39 - The Love of Christ!
- Friday:** Psalm 136 - God's love endures forever
- Saturday:** In preparation for tomorrow's worship, read I John 4:7-21