

Loving Other Christians

Matthew 22:34-40

October 23, 2011

What's love got to do with it? Well, it is all Greek to us. Well, the Greeks have a wonderful word for love: **agape**. This is God-love, gift-love, love that goes out without asking for reward. But knowing a definition and practicing are two different experiences. Yet we tend to think we know all we need to know about love.

Let's start with the idea that love **is not a second hand emotion; love is primary reality**. God originates love. We love because God first loved us. In fact the love between the persons of the Trinity is at the very heart of the Christian faith. Jesus insists that the entire word of God **hangs on loving God, neighbor, and self**. It is a love triangle within the larger triangle of the Trinity. If we try living outside this divine triangle of relationships we will wander in the wilderness forever, unhappy, searching desperately for the affirmation that never sufficiently comes. We'll be demanding from everyone, yet belonging nowhere. We will greedily seek attention for ourselves, and when we don't get it we're calling people names for not satisfying our limitless demands.

Take one example of this kind of self-centered love. In an episode of *The Big Bang Theory*, Sheldon's mom comes for a visit. She has just gotten off the plane and Sheldon wants her to cook him some fried chicken. Mom's fried chicken, he said, is why we had to get the extra large coffin for my father. Leonard tells Sheldon that mom is tired and they should go out. Sheldon retorts, "But cooking for me is how she shows she loves me. And cooking for me when she is too tired to cook is how she really shows me how she loves me." But Mom wants to go out. Sheldon says, "There's an old saying that you can lead a chicken to Crisco but you can't make your mother fry it for you."

The commandment to love can't be separated from Jesus. In fact, Jesus was the perfect practitioner of agape. As the Messiah, he has made it possible for us to love with the love of God. The commandment to love is no longer impossible because we have been called to a life of faithful discipleship and we learn love as we go. For Christians, **God and neighbor come as a package deal in the figure of Jesus**. "Jesus shows us what God looks like and how God loves. When Jesus says, whatever you did for the hungry, the naked, the prisoner, you did for me, he is showing us himself in our neighbor." So Jesus is the Lord our God, **and** he is our neighbor.

Every person we meet then is our neighbor and Jesus. And so there's only one place to go to form an understanding of our selves, and that's face to face with Jesus. Only Jesus can teach us to love ourselves and some of you may need this word most of all this morning: You shall love yourself as your neighbor. Loving yourself is important. "You're not your job, you're not your house, you're not your car, you're not

your GPA – you’re not even your family. You’re what Jesus thinks of you. Jesus believes in you and loves you. He rejoices in your existence, delights in your goodness, is tender and close to you when you are curved in on yourself.” (Sam Wells). Some of us need more “original goodness” and less “original sin.”

Love of God and neighbor come as a package deal in the church. The Great Commandment anticipates a community that is committed to the practice of love. Jesus expects this different way of living out of us. Church is a whole different community, a whole different world from the one out there.

Love gives us a new way of dealing with offenders – forgiveness.

Love gives us a new way of dealing with violence – suffering.

Love gives us a new way of dealing with money – sharing it.

Love gives us a new way of dealing with the problems of leadership – drawing on the gift of every member, even the most humble.

Love gives us a new way of dealing with a corrupt society – by building a new order.

Loves gives us a new pattern of relationships – a radical new vision of what it means to be a human person.

Love works to defeat the violence hidden in our fear of one another.

Love keeps company with faith, with a faithful community. Jesus calls us to be his disciples. Who Jesus is has everything to do with our capacity for love. Matthew places the Great Commandments about love and the question about whether or not Jesus is the Messiah together. This is not accidental.

What this means is that we have to be taught how to love and how to depend on one another.

Yet I don’t have a lot of confidence that we have been given much training in the love of God, neighbor, and self within the context of the church. Think for a moment of any training you received about love in church: Taught to be nice to people; had it drilled into our heads that we “just want everyone to get along;” told to love everybody, even enemies; taught to sing Jesus loves me for the Bible tells me so; held hands at the camp fire and sang Kum Ba Yah Lord; memorized John 3:16; told that good Christians didn’t act ugly, but encountered all of that in church.

But actual training in love? Not so much. Some of us were probably programmed to believe that being a Christian means being “permanently open to emotional exhaustion, physical burnout, psychological manipulation, and relentless guilt.” We assume that in order to love others more, we need to love ourselves less. This is a grim view of the world in which someone always has to suffer, and love means that that someone should be you. Thus we live in a perpetual state of guilt that we don’t do enough, go enough,

or give enough. When someone thinks you can meet every need and they try to make you feel guilty for not doing everything, absolutely everything, you need to know that is not love.

I want to make a modest, partial request of you: Let the members of First Baptist Church agree that we will love one another. You might protest: Why should we only love each other? My answer: **We have to start somewhere.**

Are we such romantics that we don't realize that love is always mixed with conflict? After all, the first century churches were riddled with conflict. There was a Judas among the twelve. There was so much conflict in Corinth they needed a full time mediator and conflict resolution consultant. Paul had to plead with two women in the church at Philippi to iron out their conflict. Some church members in Colossae were puffed up without cause. But at no point does Paul indicate that this means there is no love present in the church. Mixed in with all this conflict, Paul brags on his churches for their overflowing love for the gospel and for him.

Who among us is good at this sort of real life stuff? Instead our feelings are jarred, our emotions are disrupted, and our insecurity kicks in. Someone criticizes and we defend. Someone accuses and we attack. Warning signs should be posted in all churches: Conflict possible; feelings may be hurt; no one here is perfect; welcome to the gathering of hypocrites, we are glad to have another one; trust is a work in progress. You are entering the church; people don't always play fair. Love is hard work.

Loving God, neighbor, and self turns out to be rooted in the nitty gritty relationships of everyday life. Loving yourself can be so hard in a world that takes a bite out of you week after week, abuses your self-esteem, undermines your confidence.

Jesus will not have love so. Therefore he insists that the Great Commandment is the summary of the Law. The entire Word of God hangs on the love of God, neighbor, and self. The Torah was given to the children of Israel to structure everyday life. A big part of the Torah deals with how neighbors are to be treated. And there is detailed instruction about how to treat neighbors when money and property are involved.

What could be more relevant? Do you sense a lot of love orbiting around the economic system in America? I sense a lot of anger, frustration, and misunderstanding – from the Tea Party to Occupy Wall Street. One side wants to cut taxes and balance the budget and feel righteous in their demands. The other side thinks it has exemplary social principles and feel right in their demands. But unless we actually do something that is rooted in love, what more have we done than the pagans? Love issues in economic justice. This can't be that hard to accept since it is written so plainly in the Law, the Prophets, the teaching of Jesus, and the rest of the New Testament.

Do you suppose there was a lot of love on Friday when the stockholders of Rupert Murdoch's company met? I am not an economist, but I have a lifetime habit of reading Scripture, so let's listen to some Torah: "You shall not defraud your neighbor; you shall not steal" (Leviticus 19:13). "When you make a sale to your neighbor or buy from your neighbor, you shall not cheat one another. (Leviticus 25: 10, 13, 14, and 17). **"If any of your kin fall into difficulty and become dependent on you, you shall support them.** Do not take interest in advance or otherwise make a profit from them. (Leviticus 25:35-38). "There will be **no one in need among you**" (Deuteronomy 15:1-2, 4-5).

No one in need among you. There's a mission statement for America. There's a good place for the political leadership in Columbus to start. Eliminate need while eliminating waste. The measure of love is not saying, "I love you," but the measure of love is mercy and justice. I don't know how we are going to meet all the need and once in a while I wish I could escape the sense of responsibility that weighs on my heart, but we have all these needy neighbors. Here in our county, the Human Services Levy is facing \$22 million in cuts. This means clinics for children will be closing. This means senior citizens will face a potentially harsh winter without heat in their homes. This means there will be more hungry, homeless, helpless neighbors all over our valley. Non-profit, helping organizations are facing 20 to 30% cuts in their budgets. There's all this human need. Neighbors are the needy and we are not sure we are even able to love one another. Yet love is demonstrated when God's people live and give generously.

The good news: Jesus teaches us to love as he loved. The embrace of very God and very Man has made it possible for us to share in the love that is the Trinity. Love can be commanded because it has been given. So I rightly command you to love one another. Let us vow to love one another as members of the body of Christ, promise to love one another whole-heartedly. What a happy thing, therefore, for the First Baptist Church every time someone so promises and so lives. For your promise to love God and neighbor makes us all more than we otherwise could be, because through your love the body of Christ is built up.