

“God’s Definition of Love”
6th Sunday after Pentecost
Pastor Ryan

In the Spirit of St. Valentine’s Day, I have chosen to preach about two conflicting definitions of love; God’s definition of love vs. the world’s definition of love. And so I will be preaching on 1 Corinthians 13 today. Our world sees love as primarily an emotion that is experienced in a variety of different ways. From the American Heritage Dictionary we have these common definitions: ¹ *A deep, tender, ineffable feeling of affection and solicitude toward a person, such as that arising from kinship, recognition of attractive qualities, or a sense of underlying oneness.* ² *A feeling of intense desire and attraction toward a person; the emotion of romance.* ³ *an expression of one’s affection.* ⁴ *An intense emotional attachment.* Or even ⁵ *an expression of enthusiasm*, for example “I love snow skiing!”

Love is both a noun and a verb in the English language. But many times we limit it to an emotional experience. Love becomes a feeling or an intense desire for someone or something. And that is all it is according to the definition of our world today. Love is something that is marketed to us as consumers, if you use this or that product you will be more attractive and then you will capture love. At least that is the underlying message of many of our advertisements. To love and be loved is the ultimate joy of this life. And with that last message I think they are right, but not with the world’s definition of love.

With the world's limited definition of love to an emotion, you can fall in and out of love easily. What if love is only that cloud 9 experience? Whenever the person whom you love is around you that your heart skips a beat. The feeling of being absolutely alone with your beloved in a crowded room, to where it is just you and her/it is just you and him. The emotion becomes too much for words to capture the meaning of. When you are awake, or asleep their face is always on your mind. Even how amazing all of that is, the sad part is using to the world's definition that is all love can ever be.

But that is not the only definition of love. God's Word describes love as mercy, acceptance, unconditional, commitment, eternal, care and concern for your neighbor, genuine, a manifestation of God, since God is love.

Let me tell you a couple of stories about God's definition of love... A certain farmer had an unusual weathervane on his barn. Inscribed on the arrow were these words: "God is love." A passerby turned in at the gate and asked the farmer, "What do you mean by that? Do you think God's love is changeable; that it veers about as that arrow turns in the winds?" "Oh, no," replied the farmer, "I mean that whichever way the wind blows, God is still love."

A young boy was overheard asking his friend, "Wouldn't you hate to wear glasses all the time?" "No," came the answer, *"not if I had some like my Grandma's. She always sees when people are tired or sad, and she knows just what to do to make them feel better. One day I asked her how she could see that way all the time. She told me it was the way she had learned to look at*

things as she grew older." After thinking for a minute, the first boy concluded, **"Yeah, I guess you're right. It must be her glasses."**

I want to teach you the New Testament word for love. *agaph* You might have heard that word before. Repeat it with me now... *agaph* That is the word which is used to describe love, specifically God's love for us, and the kind of love we should have for each other. The basic definition of *agaph* is love; (1) especially as an attitude of appreciation resulting from a conscious evaluation and choice; used of divine and human love, devotion. Love is more than an intense emotional experience. Love in the Biblical view includes emotions don't get me wrong, but it doesn't stop at the emotional level. It dives deeper it includes all of our hearts, all of our souls, and all of our strength. The Biblical definition is a fuller understanding of the word love.

St. Paul uses this word *agaph* in 1st Corinthians 13. He uses hyperbole and personification to describe love.

^{ESV} **1 Corinthians 13:1** If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. ² 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 have not love, I am nothing.** ³ If I give away all I have, and if I deliver up my body to be burned, but have not love, I gain nothing. ⁴ **Love is patient and kind; love does not envy or boast; it is not arrogant** ⁵ **or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful;** ⁶ **it does not rejoice at wrongdoing, but**

rejoices with the truth. ⁷ **Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.** ⁸ **Love never ends.** As for prophecies, they will pass away; as for tongues, they will cease; as for knowledge, it will pass away. ⁹ For we know in part and we prophesy in part, ¹⁰ but when the perfect comes, the partial will pass away. ¹¹ When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I gave up childish ways. ¹² For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I have been fully known. ¹³ **So now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; but the greatest of these is love.**

Paul is saying, that no matter how many gifts and talented he is, if he uses them without love then his life has no meaning. Let me give you a contemporary translation of Paul's personification of *agaph*. Love suffers a long time after everyone else who have given up it holds on. Love is kind-hearted. It is not insecure so that it become jealous of every other relationship. Love doesn't brag to its friends or take advantage of trust. Love is not puffed up nor is it proud. Love does not behave in disgraceful ways. Love is not self-seeking, it is not only concerned with number 1. Love is not easily provoked into fits of rage. Love does not keep a record of wrongs, so that it can bring back in an argument on a rainy day. Love does not rejoice when darkness wins a battle, but instead it celebrates the victory of the Truth. Love covers all things, believes all things,

hopes all things, and it endures all things. Love never fails. This kind of love never lets you down nor does it leave you wanting.

How can we have this kind of love? Where can we find its truest expression? We find it at the epicenter of the Bible, where all of the Law, Prophets, Psalms, Gospels and Epistles point us to, the Cross of Jesus.

Instead of flowers or candy Jesus gave us something that truly communicated God's love for you. I can remember when I was in grade school asking my dad how much he loved me. >-----< or >-----< much. He would laugh and always say that >-----< much then give me a great big hug. Jesus said something very similar to each one of us. We ask Him, "O, Lord how much do you love me?" He smiles at you and says, this much >*-----*<.

We find *agaph* love that our world is chasing after at the cross and at the empty tomb of our Lord Jesus Christ. He has answered our question before we even asked it. "How much do you love me O Lord?" Enough to suffer and die on the cross in order to bring you safely home. Enough to rise again 3 days later, so that you would know that death has been defeated, it is now a mere doorway that you pass through to come to your heavenly home. Enough to give you my Spirit to guide you and be with you every step of your life. Enough to restore all of creation so that we can be together for all eternity.

What does *agaph* love look like among people? It looks like a father teaching his child how to swing a bat. It looks like a mother reading a bed time story to her children. It looks like a wife visiting her spouse at the hospital.

agaph love looks like a grandfather changing his grandchild's dirty diaper. It looks like so many things that are not found in romance novels or light hearted comedies. It is found in the small everyday choices to put someone else's needs above your own.

A little boy declared that he loved his mother "with all his strength." He was asked to explain what he meant by "with all his strength." He said, "Well, I'll tell you. You see, we live on the fourth floor of this tenement; and there's no elevator, and the coal is kept down in the basement. Mother is busy all the time, and she isn't very strong; so I see to it that the coal hold is never empty. I lug the coal up four flights of stairs all by myself. And it's a pretty big hold. It takes all my strength to get it up here. Now, isn't that loving my mother with all my strength?"

It most certainly is. When ever you say the words, "I love you" this weekend remember that God has told you how much He loves you from the Cross. You are beloved to the Lord. Nothing can change that. God's love trumps the world's inferior definition or expression of love any day of the week.