

It was July, and a pastor was brand new to her church. After the service, everyone agreed she had preached an excellent sermon. The next week, she preached again, and a few people noticed that her sermon sounded a little bit like her first sermon. The third week, several people noticed that this week's sermon sounded just like the last two. Finally by the fourth week, everyone was convinced that the pastor had preached the exact same sermon all month long.

The people were concerned and someone brought it up to the new pastor. "Why on earth do you keep giving the same message?"

The pastor smiled and said, "Well, I figured you wouldn't get a new sermon until you started doing what I told you to do in the first one!"

Well, my job would be a little easier, though also a lot more boring, if I were to preach the same sermon every week. But truthfully, though the words are different, if I am really doing my job, then the message you hear WILL sound familiar week after week. The truth is the heart of the gospel message and the point of all of scripture can be summarized in one word. Just one: love.

It's the reason God created in the first place. Love.

It's why the boundaries and guidelines and commandments to take care of the widow and orphan and immigrant were put in place. Love.

It's the whole sum of the New Testament. And it's the point of the life and work of Jesus Christ. Love.

It's almost Valentine's Day, a season when we talk a lot about "love." When I was in elementary school, we had Valentine's Day parties where we'd decorate a box with a slit in it, or make a big envelope out of construction paper, and put it on the fronts of our desks so we could collect valentines from our classmates.

I remember how much fun it was the day of the Valentine party to sit at my desk and open all of those little Valentine's day cards. My favorites of course were the ones that contained candy or a little present, but even the boring ones with cheesy little messages were exciting.

But there was one thing that always bothered me, even at 7 and 8 and 9 years old. Now I don't know about today's classrooms, but when I was a kid, the rule was you had to bring a card for everyone, whether you liked them or not. And I never understood the point of getting cutesy little Valentines from kids who were mean to me every other day of the year.

As though saying, "I'd be beary glad if you'd be mine" or "Valentine, I'm wild about you!" or "Be Mine, cutie pie!" with a picture of a little bear, or monkey, or apple pie made up for the not so nice things they usually said to me. I mean, don't get me wrong. I'd still eat their candy. But even back then I realized the hypocrisy of a few empty words that did not line up with the reality of actual life.

I learned at that early age that spouting words about "love" and affection mean nothing if there are no actions to back them up. Telling someone you love them only has value if you also treat them with love.

Love, in other words, is not something you say. It's something that you do. Love is something that demands action, not just a well-timed cliché.

But love as an action and not just a description of an inexplicable warm feeling is not always easy to express and even more difficult to articulate. And I think part of the reason for that is we've adopted love as a way to express affinity for or interest in something. You know what I mean. I love broccoli! I love mysteries. I love music. I love Christmas when it snows. I love mustard on my French fries. I love sappy Hallmark TV shows. I love going to the zoo. I love listening to the rain.

Love has become an affirmation of what we think or how we feel instead of a bold commitment of our pledge to care for another human being. But love is so much more than a term of endearment. Real love is powerful, life changing, bridge-building. Real love is God's gift to us. We were created in God's image, and love is the way that God's image is displayed in and reflected back from us. We are loved, and we are called to love others in response.

In 1st John, we are given a very clear description of what real love looks like. The author of this letter, who though isn't directly stated in the letter we assume to be the apostle John, uses the Greek word *agape* to describe God's love for us. In English, we have this one word "love" that has become a catch all for all kinds of feelings and emotions. But in the Greek, there are actually four words for love.

Φιλέω (*Phileō*) love, for example, is the love of companions or friends. It's a deep kind of mutual affection, a word used to describe fondness, or appreciation. We get words like "philanthropist" and "Philadelphia" from the root of *Phileo*.

Phileo is different from *Ερως* (*Eros*) love, which is romantic, erotic love. While *Phileo* means "a shared happiness," *Eros* means "my happiness." *Eros* is conditional love. It means quite specifically, "I love you because you do something for me... you make me happy." It means that other person has some quality that pleases, and by definition, when that quality is gone, so is the *Eros* behind it.

Another Greek word for love is *Στοργή* (*Storgē*), which means devotion. It's the kind of love for something that comes from you, that is a part of you. In other words, it's the love of a mother for her child or the way you love a family member. *Storge* is not based on any particular circumstance, but rather, is describes one's natural affection or obligation. When I tell my mom that I love her, I'm expressing *storge* love.

But all of those ways of describing affection and expressing "love" shrink in definition and obligation to the word used in 1 John to explain God-like love. *Ἀγάπη* or *Ἀγαπάω* (*Agapē* or *Agapaō*) is a love of esteem and honor. It is the highest, most honorable word for love in the Greek language. *Agape* has nothing to do with the one being loved. It is not based on merit or use or value. It is unconditional and matchless. It continues even when the love is not returned and even when the one being loved is unkind or undeserving. *Agape* is God-love...love that stems from the very heart of God.

Agape is concerned with the well-being of the other person. It wants nothing but good for the one being loved. It is a consuming desire for meeting another's needs and taking care of them. It is the way that God loves us, and it is the way we are expected to love others. Not with *our* needs in mind, but *theirs*.

John intentionally uses *agape* to explain the way that God loves us, and to remind us how powerfully that love was illustrated and acted out in the life and ministry of Jesus Christ. Jesus was God's gift of love to the world, and Jesus was also God's instruction book to us on how to love and what it means to love. By watching Jesus and learning from his example of crossing all cultural boundaries to embrace the least, the last and the lost, we catch a glimpse of what it means to live in love.

How do we know that God is love? Because God gave us Jesus, and in Jesus, we see an ordinary human being lay down his life in love for others. Jesus is both evidence that God loves us, and a concrete example of how we are to love and what love really is.

After John describes God's love for us and holds Jesus up as our example of that love, John then lays out the expectation is of living as God's beloved. We are loved unconditionally, and therefore, our love for others must be just as unconditional.

Love is not an abstract concept. Rather, love is an action, lived concretely, just like Jesus lived it. It is not enough for us to remember the self-sacrifice of Jesus, or even to be moved by it or grateful for it. We must embrace it, claim it as our own, and live it. John makes it clear that we cannot claim to love God and refuse to love others, because God's very nature living in us compels us to love. Just like Jesus had tied together the commandments to love God and love one's neighbor, so does John link love of God and love of others. The two are intimately tied together. Love and hate cannot coexist. Either we love God and we live in love towards those around us, or we hate people and God's love is not in us.

Verse 19 tells us that we love because God first loved us. God loves us with no expectation that we will love God back. God's love is what transforms us into from unloving to loving, from broken to whole, from flawed to perfect. And just like God loves us without condition, our response must be to love others even if they are unpleasant or uninterested in our love. William Sloane Coffin reminds us that, "God's love doesn't seek value, it creates it. It is not because we have value that we are loved, but because we are loved that we have value.

We must love others even if we don't agree with them or them with us. Agape love, remember, is love that flows from the heart of God without any stipulation that the loved one deserves that love. We must love our neighbors, and we must express that love not in empty words, but in the way we treat our neighbors, by reaching out the way Jesus did, by following his example.

But John also acknowledges that while God's love is perfect, ours is not. And that's okay. Only God can love perfectly. But by extending the tangible, real love of God to others, God's love flowing through us will perfect us, or in the words of John Wesley, sanctify us. Over time, we will be made perfect in love.

We also know that loving others is difficult. It always has been. It always will be. Human beings are wonderfully diverse, and differences in religion, gender, social status, sexuality, race, ethnicity, and language have since the beginning of time been used to draw lines to divide people and create guidelines about who is in or out of a particular group. We have been taught for generations to fear what is different. Fear is a powerful motivator. We fear the other. We fear those who are not like us because we have been taught to perceive them as a threat. Mahatma Gandhi said it this way: "The enemy is fear. We think it is hate, but it is fear."

Fear keeps us from getting close to others because we value our safety and comfort. But John responds to that fear in verse 18: There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear." Love is, as one scholar writes, "an act of courage. The kind of love that abides in God disallows differences, guidelines, rules and regulations... It is a pure and faithful expression."

There is no need to live in fear if we are living in love, because God's love is perfect, even though ours is flawed. And God's perfect love casts out the fear of our imperfect ability to love. No matter who the other is—a family member, a friend, a community member, an enemy, a refugee or an immigrant, God's deep agape love for us and God's call on our life compels us to respond to the others around us in love, the love of Jesus, the love that sacrifices self for others.

Essentially, as we study the life of Jesus, we learn from his actions and experiences that love is not simply a feeling we carry within us that reassures us of God's presence. Instead love is expressed in concrete, tangible ways, even towards those who betray us or would do us harm.

We are surrounded by people who are not like us. Even here among friends there are differences in the color of skin, in ethnicity, in sexual orientation, in marital status, in age, in gender, in political affiliation, in Biblical interpretation, in economic status, in mental and physical ability. Sometimes those differences encourage us to build walls to protect ourselves and our own interests. And, of course, once we walk out those doors today the differences grow exponentially to include many more labels and divisions.

But we are the *beloved* of God, Creator of all things. And as God's beloved, who have been unconditionally and unfathomably loved, we are called to demonstrate that same love to others, no matter how different they are. It isn't always easy. It isn't always comfortable. It certainly takes a concentrated, committed effort. But there are rewards.

First, the more we reach out in love to others, the more God-like our love becomes, and the more like Jesus we start to be.

And as we are transformed by God's love for us through the action of loving others, we begin to identify with people, care for them, and to recognize that their broken pieces are very much like our own broken pieces. We come to understand that we are not all that different after all, to celebrate our diversity instead of pushing it away or avoiding it. Doing so, we are able to release our clutch on fear and embrace each other as friends, enriching our own lives and changing our world for the better.

And finally, as God's perfect love begins to cast out the fears within us, we receive the gift of assurance, of knowing that God loves us unconditionally and believing that nothing can separate us from that love. This in itself makes God's love real to us, and though we cannot see God, we begin to understand what God's loving us really means, not mysteriously, but through the tangible love we have for each other.

So there you have it. Love. My one word sermon (and then, of course, a few thousand more to really drive the point home.) Love.

This Valentine's day, do something radical. Choose love. Acknowledge God's unconditional love for you. See that love lived out in the life and ministry of Jesus the Christ. Respond by loving others. And remember, God loves you, and so I do I. Amen.