

“For Love’s Sake”
Hosea 11:1-11; 1 John 4:1-12;
John 3:1-21

November 11, 2018
Pastor Norman Fowler
First Presbyterian Church of Moscow

We have been talking about our journey of faith—a trust in God that leads us to be part of a family of faith, to be a body of Christ. That leads us to open ourselves to the Spirit, to be guided by it, and to recognize that we have help along way. Then we might begin to think where that all takes us. What is central to it all? Love? Love. Okay, I guess that’s all we need. I probably don’t need to do the rest of the sermon. You have heard about love over and over again. Sometimes it feels like we’ve talked about love enough that it begins to feel a little trite. But again, we come to that central point of recognizing that God came because God loved the world. In 1st John, we hear that if we want to be of God, then we love one another. Love is from God. So as much as we’ve talked about it, as much as it sometimes seems like just this sentimental thing, love is central.

It’s a little bit like what Eugene Peterson’s son said about Eugene Peterson. He said, “He only had one sermon. Of course, all preachers have only one sermon.” In some ways that’s true, because the one sermon is really about God’s love for us and God inviting us to love one another. So much of the rest of it is what results from that. Yet, as I was talking about with the children a few minutes ago, what does love mean? They were great in helping us recognize that it’s about caring for others.

It’s interesting, although not everyone agrees, but I think that it’s helpful to remember that in Greek there are four different words for love: storge, philia, eros, and agape. Storge is familial love or parent-child love. Philia is usually talked about as friendship, although I think it may be intra-group loyalty, but usually it’s talked about as friendship. Eros is the love between husband and wife. And then agape, love for all people.

Now, why is this important? Sometimes philia and agape are used interchangeably, but the point I’ll make is that agape was almost never used in secular Greek society according to what I’ve read. But if you look at scripture, that’s almost always the word that’s used. So what is it about that little shift? What’s different about this love that God calls us to that is different from friendship, or sexual passion, or familial love? What’s different about it?

One thing that feels different about it is that it seems to suggest that it’s a way of seeing that sees the value and worth of another. When we think about the idea that God so loved the world, we can think that God saw value and worth. It takes me back to remember that God, at creation, said creation is good. And God still values and sees creation and the creatures in it as worth loving.

There is also this element of choice. We recognize that there is some way in which it seems to be just the character of God, but it does seem to be the will of God to do this, to carry it out, to love the world. I think that idea that God could choose, and chooses to care is important. When it comes down to us trying to figure out what it means to love, there’s an element of choice in it.

The other thing that is part of that is that there's a way in which this idea of agape is filled with a sense of activity. It's not just a sentiment. I can say I love somebody and care about them, and not do a thing. It's just a way I feel. But there seems to be something about agape, this sense of love, which is filled with a sense of wanting to do something.

So there are these three components to agape: it's based on the value and worth of the other; it's a clear determination of will and judgment; and it's an earnest, anxious desire for and an active and beneficent interest in the well-being of the other. That's kind of a lot for a little word. But when it's the center of what God is inviting us to, it feels incredibly important.

The other aspect of this word is a realization that when we use it, we are talking about something. We are talking about some kind of relationship. Even if I say I love my car, it's because it's got a special place in my life. Generally we go further about that. When we talk about people we love, it's really about that relationship between people. It's a relational word. When God says it's central—it's the greatest commandment, Jesus says—it's saying there's something central about relationships, and a relationship with one another.

In some ways I'd like to say the world is created a particular way. We know that if we talk about the physical world we know it works a certain way. There's gravity. That's the way it is. In the moral universe and in the relational universe, central to that is love. People have done some studies and recognized that, well, let me put it this way.

Let's take two young people. Let's say there's a baby named Amy. Amy's parents love Amy a lot. They hold her. They feed her. They comfort her when she cries. They give her what she needs, not only physically, but they show and impress upon her the love they have for her. So by the time Amy is about 8, she's a pretty happy child. She gets along with her peers. She's doing well in school. She seems bright.

Then, let's say there's another young child. Let's call her Miriam. Miriam is born; she's put in a crib. She gets all her physical needs met but is rarely held, rarely touched. And what happens? Well, if she survives—because what we've found is that without a lot of physical touch, without that sense of being loved, children may not actually survive—but if she survives, she's probably sullen, with outbursts of anger, having a hard time getting along with her peers, not really able to catch on to what's going on in school. This is what the research suggests—that without being loved, a child fails to thrive, to get along with others, to develop cognitive or behavioral skills.

When I talk about there being a moral universe, it feels like that's an example of what it means. God has shaped our world for us to love one another and when that love isn't present it causes problems. We know that adverse childhood experiences, those non-loving acts, affect children throughout their lives. We also know that one way of changing that effect is when people begin to feel loved, when people are listened to. Part of one of the studies involved people who had had something traumatic happen to

them, some kind of abuse as a child. The doctors simply took time to ask about if anything had happened and when something had come up, they simply said, “I’m so sorry. That should have never happened to you.” That simple statement made a huge impact in those people’s lives.

We live in a world where there is darkness, and the trouble is that it’s not always easy to tell what the darkness is, what’s sweet and what’s not. I heard a story recently. There was a little bowl next to the stove with some white stuff in it. This was a Grandma telling me this story. She was making hot cereal for the children. She made the cereal and she took some of that white stuff alongside the stove and she put it in because she thought it was sugar. Then she gave it to the grandchildren. They were incredibly polite grandchildren. They took a bite and then tried to play around with it for a while. You know the story—it was salt. How often in the world do we have to discern between something that looks like it might be something sweet, or not. How do we do that?

We live in a world that is shadowed—shadowed by human desire, shadowed by human fear, shadowed by human ambition, shadowed in a way that there is too often too much darkness. The idea is that we have to figure it out. My belief is we can’t always tell. When we live in the shadow, we’re not always clear that we are in a shadow. We’re just used to it. That’s why we need the light that Christ brings. We need the light that God gives us. We need the love of God in our lives. It is as we accept that love that we begin to realize the nature of what God is leading us to.

It says in 1st John, “Let us love one another because love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God.” We can use that idea of love as a way of discerning the world we live in. Is it something that brings life to the people we care about, to the people God cares about (which happens to be all people)? Does it bring life?

In this stewardship season, we chose a verse that talked about bringing the first fruits of our lives to God. What’s the very first fruit that God has given us? Love. God so loved the world, before we did anything, that he sent his only son, not to condemn the world but to heal the world. The very first thing God brings us is love, and the very first thing God asks of us, the greatest commandment, is to love God with our heart, mind, soul, and strength, and our neighbor as ourselves. The very first thing we can bring to God is love.

Stewardship is a response to God’s love with the very first fruits of our lives in response to God, which I think is also love. However, if we just say, “I feel it,” I don’t think that’s all God means by love. When we love someone else, we have to show it. It takes concrete action. God’s concrete action to us was to send his son so that we might know his grace. He invites us, as we love one another, as we love God and love our world, to use concrete actions. He invites us to use our time, our talent, and our resources to do God’s work, to show God’s love, to *be* God’s love. So when we talk about doing stewardship, it’s love in action. Amen.