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The National Presbyterian Church

## Love: Love That Labors

John 13:1-5; 12-17

Dr. David Renwick

In my first few weeks here at The National Presbyterian Church our sermons are focusing on three central and eternal Christian virtues; virtues that the apostle Paul refers to when he writes to the church in Corinth in his first letter and in the 13<sup>th</sup> Chapter. There, at the end of the Chapter, he says that “faith, hope and love remain” – and he means eternally: they last forever. He singles out faith, hope and love as primary Christian virtues. So these are the three virtues that we are thinking about in our sermons in these weeks.

- Last week we began by thinking together about the first off these, faith. About the faith of a young Jewish woman by the name of Esther, after whom a book in our Old Testament was named. How Esther saw her life with all its ups and its downs *as her own*. And then how she began to see that her life was not her own, but was encompassed within the great plan of God which our Lord Jesus calls the Kingdom of God, or the Kingdom of Heaven. And by faith she embraced her place within that larger purpose and found a meaning and significance within her own life that she could never have found for herself in any other way -- by faith -- leading to an act of courage that touched and transformed her life as well as the lives of others.
- Next Sunday when we come to the anniversary of 9-11, we're going to be thinking about hope: hope that so often is lost in time of tragedy but which is vital to maintain throughout our lives, no matter what, no matter what life may bring. It too, says Paul is in the top- three list.

Today I want us to think about the third of these virtues, the virtue of love – faith, hope *and love*. **The love that Jesus speaks about frequently.** The love that Jesus says is the greatest thing: to love God and to *love* our neighbor (Matthew 22:36-40). The love which Jesus summons from us not only for one another, not only for those we like, those who are around us, but for those we do not like, who we might deem to be our enemies: he tells us to *love* our enemies! (Matthew 5:44) Love which, we find Jesus saying is a primary vehicle of our witness to him – by this all people will know that you are my disciples, my friends, that you *love* one another (John 13:35). And this love is not merely to come from us as loving individuals, but from us as a community: “*By this all people will know that you [plural] are my disciples if you [plural] have love for one another.*” And these words are in a passage in which Jesus teaches his disciples just before he leaves this earth: they are like his final instructions, his last reminder, his greatest plea! And he reinforces the message about this love on that last night by demonstrating love; by washing the feet of his best friends, and by telling them how critical it is that their witness be powerful after he in the flesh has gone from them: do it by love!

So we want to think about love today even though, and perhaps especially, because **love is hard to know how to apply within our lives in particular circumstances.** Different circumstances call for different expressions of love. We know this, don't we? The best way to explain it is simply by referring to the terms gentle love and tough love. We all know that there are times when, especially as parents bringing up children, times when we need to be gentle and soft and affirming and comforting and bring our hugs and our kisses with us. We need that gentle love. But there are other times, aren't there, when what is needed is what we might call tough love: the love which restrains, that holds back from danger, that holds somebody to account. It may not feel like love at all, in fact: at *that* moment we might feel that we are not loving. But it may be *the very best thing* for somebody, and especially for a child, to receive. One of the great dilemmas of life of course is that within a family often one parent wants to show gentle love and the other parent wants to show tough love!! And there we have the issue: how do we decide which love is the love that is best at that moment?!

So applying love can be hard in life; knowing how exactly to apply it because of different situations. But this love business is hard not only because of the situational differences, but it can also be hard because when we use the word 'love' we do not always mean the same

thing by it. Different aspects and expressions of love come into play, even within the same situation or moment. Love is a huge concept to deal with and unless we can get a sense of the multiple dimensions of love we will not know exactly what Jesus is commanding us to do when he says that we are to love one another.

The best way that I have ever found to help explain these dimensions of love comes from C.S. Lewis. I know that C.S. Lewis was a favorite of Earl Palmer (He is the C.S. Lewis expert, I am not! You will not hear too much C.S. Lewis from me – just once in a while!) But today is a C.S. Lewis day, because C.S. Lewis, the great Oxford scholar and author, wrote a book some 60 years ago now called *The Four Loves*, in which he speaks about the different dimensions of love. He points out that in ancient Greek, in the Greek speaking world there were four words for love that we often roll into one word, ‘love,’ which leads to much confusion. So we have to unravel, unpack, the word, in order to understand what the implications of the word are for our particular lives. And this morning that’s exactly what I would like to do. The four loves he mentions are written for you in your bulletin and the four words are these: *eros*, *storgē*, *filia*, and *agapē*. *Eros*, *storgē*, *filia*, and *agapē*. And we’re going to consider these one-by-one, beginning with *eros*, from which we get our English word ‘erotic’.

**1. EROS.** Clearly this word has to do with romantic love, with the love between a man and a woman. This has to do with emotional love, passionate love, in which we are gripped by a sense of love, which at times overwhelms us and turns our world upside down. This is the love, which is usually referred to in songs, which are sung about love; love songs including, for example, the song by that great theologian (!!) Elvis Presley, that goes like this. We’re going to exegete his song right now.

*Bless my soul what's wrong with me?  
I'm itching like a man on a fuzzy tree.  
My friends say I'm acting wild as a bug. (And why?)  
I'm in love. I'm all shook up.  
I'm in love. And I'm all shook up."*

It shakes everything up. It turns everything upside down. You know the next line?

*Uh-huh, mm-hm, yeah-yeah . . .*

And then,

*Well my hands are shaky and my knees are weak.*

*I can't seem to stand on my own two feet.*

*Who do you think of when you have such luck?*

*... I'm in ... love; I'm all shook up.*

And that's what *eros*-love does. It shakes us up. Which is hard for us Presbyterians, because we want things done 'decently and in order.' And this love disrupts our lives. So that we come across a person who has always done things 'decently in order.' They're stable as a rock. We know them. But they are now doing things which are out of character and we can't understand it. Until somebody nudges us and says, "You idiot, you've missed it! Don't you see? They're in love." And because of love, *eros*-love, their lives are changed.

But this *eros* is not just a passionate emotional and sometimes irrational love *for other people*. We can have it for *ideas and pursuits and callings* as well. So for example we may send our children off to college so that they can be trained for a good, well-paying, serious career. They finish college with significant debt. They come out the other side, and then they tell us that they want to go off to serve the Lord in some land far away where "I'll earn no money for the next five to ten years and maybe not thereafter." And we're saying "Hey, how are you going to pay off these debts?" But it's clear that they have a passion for this. And we're caught because of that passion, this *eros*-love that they have.

Or we write a dissertation and we give our life to this dissertation and it is a part of our souls. And somebody comes up to us and they say "Oh, I hear you've written a dissertation. Tell me about it in five minutes or less." And we cannot do it. Five hours maybe, although it seems to us like five minutes. We wax eloquent about something that's close to our heart because we're in love with it. And time simply disappears when *eros*-love is there.

So there is '*eros*,' says C.S. Lewis, as part of love. *Eros*, by the way never appears in the New Testament as a word for love; and it only appears in the Old Testament Greek translation known as the Septuagint on a couple of different occasions. Still, it is obviously an important aspect of love within our lives and is clearly demonstrated in Scripture in various relationships there. So that's the first Greek dimension of love. The first word is *eros*.

**2. STORGĒ.** The second word for love from the Greek world that C.S. Lewis looks at is the word *storgē*. *Storgē* is what we would call family love. Love of family, love of a group; especially of a group which forms

and shapes our identity. And I hope that that would be the case the kind of love we have in this congregation: a group that forms and shapes our identity. It's certainly the case within a normal family, even where you might find two siblings who fight with each other tooth and nail and whom you might say, 'They hate each other; they can never get on with each other.' But then somebody comes in from the outside and attacks one of them, what happens? Well, they close ranks! They say, 'Wait a minute. You don't come into our turf here and do that. When push comes to shove, we belong to each other. This is who we are.' You may not see it all the time but it's deep within their heart and their soul. And this family love, this love of a group which gives us our identity; often a family, but *storgē*-love stretches beyond the family, beyond blood (though we often speak of this kind of love as being 'thicker than blood'), to colleges and fraternities and sororities and teams that we support.

Many of you know that I've been living in South Carolina for the last five years and in South Carolina there are a couple of major universities. I had a liturgical stole (scarf) made which has a correct liturgical green on one side and on the other side is orange and purple and garnet and black. About half the congregation went to the University of South Carolina and the other half went to Clemson University, and these are their colors. After the Clemson South Carolina football game I would wear this stole . . . as a peacemaker: of course, what happens to peacemakers is that you get shot at from both sides . . . because they're passionate, they love their colleges with *storgē*-love. It's strong, with our colleges, with the various groups we belong to and which play a part in shaping our identity.

Now, the word '*storgē*' does not appear in the Bible at all, although it certainly is a dimension of what we refer to when we speak about love – our love of groups, including the church which should be a central group shaping our sense of identity.

So there is *eros*: passionate, emotional, sometimes irrational love.

And there is *storgē*: the love of family or group.

**3. FILIA.** And in the third place there is *filia* as in Philadelphia. *Adelphos* in Greek means 'brother,' a '*philos*' is a friend, and '*philia*' is friendship – Philadelphia, the city of brotherly love. For the ancient Greeks friendship was a prized possession. You did not strive necessarily for wealth or for success. You may have done that, but what you treasured

above everything else were friendships, those friendships in which you could be yourself with somebody. You didn't have to put on any face. There didn't need to be any persona, you could be who you were, and you could be at peace and find true pleasure in those friendships – kindred spirits. We all know this kind of friendship – where you know somebody, you've known them for years and then you part ways, you don't see them for years. You come back again and you pick up exactly where you left off. And you say ah, this is a treasure. Even when you're gone it's a part of my life. This is the kind of love, this *filia*, that Anna of Green Gables had for her friend Diana in those stories set in Prince Edward Island where they were kindred spirits. And though they were quite different this friendship lasted through their lives Anna's a go-getter. She's a successful person. She's on the move and Diana is a homebody and Diana could easily be jealous of her friend Anna but she is not. It's the furthest thing from her mind. They are friends. They are friends. Kindred spirits and nothing, nothing can break this apart.

One of the sad things about our society these days according to some recent studies is that friendship is on the decline. The number of close friends that people have is on the decline. In a study reported in the American Sociological Journal in 2006 a study conducted from 1985 to 2005 Americans reported a significant decline in their close friendships. And the friendships with people with whom they could share their deepest needs had declined to the extent that in 2005 only three people out of four could say they had a close friend. One out of four said I do not have a close friend with whom I could share something really critical in my life if it came my way. Clearly in the Church this should never be the case. And we have to be working on *filia* within the church to build friendships so that nobody is in that kind of a situation.

So in the Greek world there is *filia* and there is *storgē* and there is *eros*: friendship, love, love of a family, love of a group, emotional love, passionate love. And then finally there is, and this is the dominant word used in the pages of scripture there is a love called *agapē*, *a-g-a-p-e*, *agapē* love. In the New Testament it's used around 200 times and in the Greek Old Testament about the same number of times. It is the most common word in the Bible used for love. And it encompasses those other loves but it goes beyond them. It is, as we would say today unconditional love. It is the love that God has for us, the love that is embodied in Deuteronomy 7 part of our Call To Worship where God

says through Moses to the people of Israel that: I have set you free from slavery not because of anything you did, not because you are more numerous than all the people on the face of the earth but simply because I chose to love you. I simply chose to love you. This love is a choice. I've never found a better definition for this love than the definition given by the late Scottish theologian William Barkley who said of *agapē* this, he said: "*Agapē* is the spirit which says that no matter what any person does to me I will never seek to harm him or her. I will never set out for revenge. I will always seek nothing but his highest good." That is to say *agapē* is unconquerable benevolence. It is not simply a wave of emotion it is a deliberate conviction of the mind issuing in a deliberate policy of the life. It is a deliberate achievement and conquest and victory of the will. This is *agapē*. This is what we have been commanded to do. When Jesus commands us to love this is the love that he is referring to. At times it will be filled with emotion but you cannot guarantee that. At times it will be for your group but it may or may not be for your group. It may be for somebody who is deemed to be your enemy. At times it is the love embodied for a friend but it goes beyond friendship. It goes beyond the love-ability of the one whom one loves. That is not the point – how lovable they are. The point is that this is a decision that we make and perhaps make especially at the moment when the beloved is least lovable.

This is the love of Joseph for Mary at the moment when he finds out that Mary is carrying a baby and the baby is not his. Now we might say well the angels come and they explain it and he should be all okay. And maybe that's the case. But these things take a little while to get used to and you don't have angels all the time. And he knows that the baby is not his and Luke's Gospel gives us this little human vignette in which we hear that Joseph wrestles with this and decides not to divorce Mary or put her to shame. And this is a choice of *agapē*. This is a choice of *agapē*, of love at the moment when however lovable Mary may have been before at that moment he's probably not feeling too good. And he chooses. He chooses to love her and not put her to shame. This is the love of Jesus for us. The love of Jesus who left Heaven, the eternal Son of God leaving Heaven to come here and live here on earth for us. And not only on earth but descending to the depth of the earth and allowing himself to be abused by human people, put to shame by human people. Willing to wash the feet of his disciples. What could make him do that? Not our lovability but his choice to love

us. A choice that he will never change and from which love nothing can separate us in Heaven or on earth.

This is the love embodied at the communion table in the bread and in the wine. His body broken, his blood shed for you and me and in the cross that rises above us. What wondrous love is this, oh my soul. And this is the love that he wants us to have by which all people will know that we are his disciples. Without that they will not know. But this is hard. Indeed humanly speaking it is impossible. So Jesus' commandment always drives us back to God and to our dependence on God to equip us with the gifts that he commands us to have, and to say: Lord God I do not have this love, I cannot have it always. Sometimes yes, but I need it because you want this to be part and parcel of my person forever. Come by your Spirit. Live within me. Come take these elements. Nourish me, nurture me, help me grow that I might grow with your power into the person you want me to become, that we as a community might grow into the community that God wants us to be. Love one another. Love your neighbor. Love your enemy. By this all people will know that you are my disciples. *Eros*, passionate love, emotional love, sometimes irrational, I hope this is a part of our lives from time to time. We all need to be thrown into a world of confusion so that God can reorder and shape our lives. *Storgē*, be aware of the groups that form and shape your life. May this be such a community. *Filia*, friendships, if we have no friends plead to the Lord for friendships and plead that this congregation may be a congregation in which we find friends who are truly kindred spirits. And *agapē*, unconditional love, God's love for us that he longs to pour into our hearts through Jesus Christ that even through us the world may know that we believe.

Let us bow before God in prayer. Holy God humble us before Your mighty throne that we might know Your calling, feel how great it is and be amazed that You should long to equip us to fulfill it. Make this our passion. Give us a passion, and *eros* passion to be filled with *agapē* together in this community with those who are friends and those who are not. In Christ's name we ask this, Amen.

### **THE NATIONAL PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH**

4101 Nebraska Avenue, N.W. Washington, D.C. 20016

[www.NationalPres.org](http://www.NationalPres.org) 202.537.0800