

The Workroom of Love

1 John 3:11-18

My Heart, Christ's Home
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Sunday, March 28, 2004

If you glanced at today's sermon title, you may be wondering what love has to do with a workroom. Love calls up images of hearts and flowers, of romance and weddings, while a workroom makes us think of chisels and hammers, paint cans and drop cloths. In our culture love is defined by the Greek word "eros" and its spin-off "erotic," words that describe everything from mutual attraction to sexual intercourse. So what does a workroom have to do with love?

Admittedly, very little to do with erotic love. But then, the Greek word eros never once appears in the New Testament. Writing under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, these authors never once speak of erotic love. The love these people experienced when they met Jesus Christ had nothing to do with attractiveness, or charisma, or charm. When God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, long-stemmed roses and Godiva chocolates had nothing to do with it. So the New Testament writers avoided absolutely the emotionally-charged word eros. Instead, they picked up and dusted off a word rarely used in Greek literature before that time: AGAPE.

And agape is, first and foremost, A WORKING CONCERN FOR OTHERS. "Little children," John writes, "let us love (agape), not in word or speech but in truth and action." (v. 18) In other words, don't just talk the talk; walk the walk! Because agape rolls up its sleeves and goes to work for neighbors in need.

That's why I speak of the workroom of love. Agape may have you hammering nails in a Habitat home sometime this year. Agape may induce you to ladle out eggs and grits to the homeless at the Third Street Church of God in the near future. Agape may persuade you to teach English as a second language in Thailand, with the mission team going there soon. Agape may spur you to make a significant donation to next Sunday's One Great Hour of Sharing offering, so the hungry can be fed and the homeless housed. Make no mistake: agape love is a hard-working, risk-taking, active concern for others.

And that's not all. Agape love is also a DISINTERESTED CONCERN FOR OTHERS. Disinterested because, when you reach out and touch another life, you don't have to have your name in print, or be interviewed on the six o'clock news. Disinterested, because you're not concerned about getting credit for what you do; you do it just because it needs doing.

Who can tell me the name of the Good Samaritan? We don't know, do we? What was the name of the widow who tossed her last two cents into the offering plate, the woman Jesus praised so highly for her sacrificial generosity? What was the name of the little guy who gave up his bag lunch so Jesus could feed the five thousand? What was the name of the woman who poured the jar of expensive ointment on Jesus' head just before his arrest. Jesus said, "She has anointed my body beforehand for its burial. Wherever the good news is proclaimed in the whole world, what she has done will be told in remembrance of her." Yet we don't know her name, or the names of the others I've mentioned. Why? Because they weren't out to promote themselves; they were out to serve others as God had served them.

Who are the people in our church who house the homeless here in Ward Three? Who are the people who deliver hot food through Meals on Wheels? Who are the people who tutor children at the Unique Learning Center in DC? What are the names of the teenagers who travel to the Dominican Republic every summer to teach Vacation Bible School and work on church buildings for a poor congregation? Why don't we know their names? Because their agape love is a disinterested concern. They don't care who gets the credit so long as God gets the glory.

Finally, agape love is SACRIFICIAL CONCERN FOR OTHERS. According to John in today's text, the cross is the supreme expression of agape love: "We know love (agape) by this, that he (Jesus) laid down

his life for us--and we ought to lay down our lives for one another." (v. 16)

But if that is what agape love requires, a cross-like sacrifice, who can measure up? I certainly cannot! And John, the writer of this letter, knows it only too well. He knows that the idea of literally laying down our lives for others is frightening and overwhelming. That's why, without pausing for breath, John goes on to say, "How does God's love abide in anyone who has the world's goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refused help?" Do you see what he's doing? He is bringing sacrifice down from the cross and inserting it into our daily routines, down from what appears impossible to what is within the grasp of every person in this sanctuary. He is saying that the sacrifice acceptable to God consists simply in not closing our hearts to a brother or sister when we have something they need.

So when you fill a One Great Hour of Sharing offering envelop with a generous check, you will answer the call to love sacrificially. When you give pro bono legal or medical assistance, you are answering the call to love sacrificially. When you commit fifty hours to Stephen Ministry training, or a similar amount of time to our Care Team ministry, you are answering the call to love sacrificially. When you carve out several hours every week to prepare a Sunday school lesson, you are answering the call to love sacrificially.

Fill in the blank for yourself. You have eyes to see fear or anxiety in a colleague's face. You have ears to hear the cry of distress from a lonely neighbor. You have a heart for people afflicted with HIV/AIDS. And you have a little time, and a scrap of energy, and above all, a Christ-like desire to do something about it. You need not be heroic, John says, so long as you do not close your heart against your neighbor in need.

In C. S. Lewis' book "The Screwtape Letters," a senior devil in hell named Screwtape gives the following advice to Wormwood, a junior devil on earth, who is trying to undermine the faith of a young Christian. "The great thing is to prevent his doing anything. As long as he does not convert it into action, it does not matter how much he thinks about this new repentance. Let the little brute wallow in it. Let him, if he has any bent that way, write a book about it; that is often an excellent way of sterilizing the seeds which the Enemy (meaning God!) plants in a human soul. Let him do anything but act. No amount of piety in his imagination and affections will harm us if we can keep it out of his will. As one of the humans has said, active habits are strengthened by repetition but passive ones are weakened. The more often he feels without acting, the less he will be able ever to act, and, in the long run, the less he will be able to feel."

So it makes little difference how you feel when you leave the sanctuary this morning, because Christian love is not a warm fuzzy feeling. Love is labor, sometimes sacrificial, often anonymous, and always disinterested and concrete. And this shall be your reward: in eternity you will stand before your Savior, alongside the Samaritan, and the boy who gave up his sack lunch, and the widow who gave her all in the offering plate, and the woman who poured out a year's salary on the head of her Savior. That's mighty good company, whether you ever get your name in lights or not!