

Three Loves of Life:
Agape

John 3:16

This morning we finish the sermon series on the Three Loves of Life. We're talking about the three Greek words for love used in the New Testament. We've talked about *eros*, which is the love that says, "I love you for what you do for me." This is the love of lovers—not necessarily romantic lovers, but those who love something or someone who makes their lives happier. We've seen a great outpouring of *eros* love for Michael Jackson this past week. It wasn't romantic love. It was love for a person who, during his lifetime, made people happy with his singing and his dancing. We also saw a great outpouring of *eros* love for Farrah Fawcett. There probably was an element of romantic love in the love of her fans.

Last week we talked about *philos* love, which says, "I love you for what we do for each other." This is the love of friends, partners, teammates, companions, church members and married couples. When we make a commitment to one another to walk this journey through life together, to face life's challenges together, to achieve goals together, a bond of affection and loyalty develops between us. This is *philos* love.

This morning we will talk about *agape*, which says, "I love you for what I do for you."

Agape love is the love of God. It is best exemplified by Christ on the Cross. *Agape* love is the love that says, "I love you for what I do for you." *Agape* love doesn't ask for anything in return, other than the joy of being able to make a difference for the better for someone else. *Agape* love just gets such a delight out of being able to do something to help people be stronger, healthier, happier, wiser, more mature, to have a better life and be better people, that that is all an *agape* lover wants.

This is the love John 3:16 talks about: God so **loved** the world that he **gave** his Son, so that we might have **life**. This is what Jesus was talking about when he said, "It is more blessed to give than to receive." There is more joy in *agape* love than there is in *eros* love. There is more joy in giving than in receiving.

You can see why *agape* is the love of God. Talk about the problem of "What do you give the person who has everything?" What could God possibly want from us? God doesn't need anything from us. A few weeks ago I talked about the things that people think God needs from us, things like companionship, praise, worship, obedience, and service. I showed how God doesn't need any of those things. We give them to God because we need God's fellowship; We need to praise and worship God; We need to be obedient to God. We need to serve God. But God doesn't need those things or anything else.

So, why does God have anything to do with us? Because God gets such joy and pleasure out of helping us become better people and have better lives.

I grow orchids. Now, that sounds impressive to some folks. It's really not. What I mean by growing orchids is, I take the orchids that people give me or I buy at the store, and I take care of them and work to get them to bloom as many times as I can. Now, let's look at my relationship with my orchids from the perspective of the orchids. If orchids could think, my orchids would probably wonder why I take such good care of them. They would wonder why I

catch rain water to water them. They would wonder why I buy fertilizer for them. They would wonder why I am constantly moving them from place to place so that they get just the right amount of sunlight from day to day. They would wonder why I carefully repot them periodically. They would wonder why am I taking such good care of them, what I get out of all that effort. The answer is simple—I get the joy of seeing them be healthy and bloom.

That is why God cares for us with such great love. It's for the joy of the possibility of seeing us bloom.

And I have to emphasize the word *possibility*. This orchid on the altar is one of mine. It is one of my greater successes. It has fourteen blooms. Here is another of my orchid. I'm hoping it will survive. It may produce a bloom someday, but I doubt it. I put the same amount of love and care into both of these plants and got very different results.

That's the problem with *agape* love. There are no guarantees.

Have you ever tried to help someone and it didn't turn out well? As I was driving to Wells week before last to visit our UM Army there, we drove through a little town, and I couldn't help but think of the time I helped a man get a position as the pastor of the Methodist Church in that town. He had been the pastor of a troubled, dying church in the town I was pasturing. He wanted out of that church. We were in the Ministerial Alliance together, and he was a bright, energetic fellow. I suggested he talk to my District Superintendent about pasturing a Methodist Church. He was excited about the possibility. I talked with the District Superintendent. They met. And the District Superintendent arranged for him to pastor the Methodist Church in this little town. I thought I had helped a lot of people. The man had a church to pastor. The church had a good pastor. And the District Superintendent had a problem solved, as he had been looking for someone for this church. It was win-win. The problem was the man couldn't adjust to the Methodist way of doing things. He didn't understand how Methodists worship, and he couldn't understand how Methodists conduct business. He bombed out. The District Superintendent had to take him out of that church. It turned out to be a lose-lose situation.

I had no motivation for doing what I did, except love for all involved. I wanted to help. But just because your motivations are good, doesn't mean the results are good.

God created us for the joy of seeing us bloom, seeing us really live, seeing us become beautifully mature people, possessing life abundant and eternal. But many will choose the road that does not lead to life. God could have taken the safe road and not created us. God could have been spared the great sorrow of seeing those whom God loves choose not to bloom by simply not creating us. But God is willing to bear that sorrow for the sake of those who choose life.

If God can't force people to bloom, to become better people and have better lives, how can we? Trying harder to mold people into the people we want them to be and to live as we want them to live usually doesn't work. We can only try to free them from those things which are hindering them from blooming and offer them opportunities to become better people and have better lives. The rest is up to them. Some will not bloom. Does that mean we should stop loving people because some fail to bloom? No. We can't stop doing our best to lift people just because it doesn't always work. *Agape* love demands that we keep trying.

It's sad when it doesn't work. But what a joy it is when it does work.

I remember a boy who was in his early teens. He was one of a very few youth we had in this little country church I was pastoring at the time. His father died suddenly. His mother started drinking heavily. This boy was in great danger of falling into a very destructive lifestyle. But the church held onto him and loved him. They supported him. The boy graduated from high

school. His mother died. And we lost track of him. Then one day he showed up in church. He had grown into a big, strong, handsome young man. He was making a career of the military. He was obviously a smart young man and was making good decisions. He had a great future ahead of him. And I couldn't help but think, the love of the church gave him the opportunity to become this fine young man. He had to choose to make the most of that opportunity. But we gave him that opportunity. What a joy. What a thrill.

We loved this boy with *agape* love. We loved him for what we could do for him. We loved him for the possibility of seeing him bloom. And when he did, it was worth every bit of effort we put into him.

Last week I said that if the three loves of life were a tree, *eros* love would be the blooms, giving the tree beauty, aroma and fruitfulness. *Philos* love would be the trunk and the branches, giving our love for people strength and shape. *Agape* love would be the roots, which nurture all our relationships.

Let me go a step further with this picture. God's love for us is the earth in which the roots find nourishment. If we sink our roots deep in the *agape* love of God and soak up God's love, we will be conduits for this love for all the people whom we love in every way. God's love will strengthen our *philos* love for our neighbors, our companions, our friends, our families, our neighbors, our brothers and sisters in Christ and our spouses. God's love will make our *eros* love interests even more exciting, fun, and satisfying.

Dwell in God's love and you will grow in your capacity to love.

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