

Sermon for 06/04/06

Something, something, and love: the Christian Virtue of Love

Grace to you and peace from God our Father, and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ,
AMEN

Main Theme: In 1st Cor. 13, Paul tells us there are three “Christian Virtues” – Faith, Hope, and Love. Today we ask - “What is love?” The fact is, we were *created by* God for love! But regardless of what TV tells us, love is not sex. And love is not “luv” – a modern sentimentalization of love. God’s love, *true love*, is revealed in Jesus Christ! It’s a divine love that is unmotivated by any gain for itself, or any need in itself. Though called to love this way, we all resist it to some extent, and when we do – we love imperfectly. Yet with Christ living in us, we can begin to experience and share a love that 1) does not insist on its own way, 2) never ends, 3) rejoices in the truth, and 4) recognizes it is only in its infancy – seeing and knowing “in part”.

1) NEED OR KNOW? Originally, my intent in this short sermon series was to talk *only* about the first two Godly gifts mentioned in 1st Corinthians 13: faith and hope. After all, Paul went on to cover the topic of love in great detail throughout the rest of the chapter, and after all, “**Do we really need to say anything about the “greatest of these” – love? Don’t we all know instinctively that what makes the greatest difference in our live is love?**” Do we have to be a brain surgeon, rocket scientist, or a seminary theologian to know why the poets and songwriters keep harping on love? Hardly, even the Beatles told us in a song - “**All you need is love!**” Don’t we all know this to be true? So *why talk about love at all* – is it even necessary?

2) ISN’T NECESSARY! Well, in a way, it isn’t necessary. Something almost automatically responds to the biblical statement that (1st John 4:8) “**God is love!**” How can you *not* be touched by the fact that “**God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten son...**” (John 3:16) Are any of us *really* surprised when Jesus sums up the entire law of God this way: (Mark 12:31) “**Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength. The second is this: Love your neighbor as yourself. There is no commandment greater than these.**” Jesus said this, **KNOWING** that there was a certain built in “readiness” in His hearers to receive such a commandment. It merely told us what we already suspected – “**God created us for love!**” That’s why St. Augustine said that we are “**restless**” until we know ourselves to be loved, and love in return. So in one way **it isn’t necessary** to talk of love.

3) MISUNDERSTOOD! But on the other hand, perhaps it is! *Why?* Because in today's broken world – there is no concept more **“misunderstood”** as love! ***Especially Christian love.*** Unfortunately, too many people today use **“love”** as another word for **“sex”**. I read recently that today's younger generations are having a hard time struggling to understand **“romantic love”**. They watch old films, or read 19th century novels and find all the talk and gestures and agonizing of young lovers as pretty comical, and sometimes ridiculous. “Why,” many young people asked, “don't they just **hop into bed** with one another?” After all, isn't that what **today's** heroes do in today's films and novels? Unfortunately, we live in a broken world that is **equating love with sex**. How sad that real love is so **misunderstood**.

4) EQUATING LOVE WITH SEX! Now Christianity does not deny a sacred connection between **love** and **sex**, but we do not let this connection **define** Christian **love**! **Love** is **far more inclusive** than just its sexual expressions. Some of the **most loving people** in history remained celibate. And yet our media driven society doesn't understand people who for religious reasons (or for any reasons) have intentionally chosen celibacy as a lifestyle. They think them **strange** and **unusual** creatures! Sadly, our children watch as society seems to elevate only those people who the media calls **“sexy”**. Friends, the **worth** and **meaning** of our lives does **not** depend on our capacity for sexual expression. Our sexuality does **not** define our personhood! Let me make this a little clearer by saying, God does not treasure **“sexy people”** more than **“non-sexy”** people! (Sounds silly when I put it that way, doesn't it). Yet we live in a broken world that is **equating love with sex**. And this is an absurd and frightening thing – because according to God, it is **not** our sexuality that makes us **reflections of the divine**! **Jesus** was celibate, (despite what the DeVinci code is suggesting), and we would **never** say Jesus knew nothing about **love**. For **Christ was love** in its purist form!

5) LUV! Another thing that **love** is not! **It is not “luv”!** I'm talking about the **“sentimentalization of love”** found in most of the greeting cards you buy at the drugstore today. You turn love into **“luv”** by **omitting** from the card any mention that love profoundly challenges our self-centeredness. You don't remind the reader that the **commitment** that goes with real love is **true commitment**! You certainly don't hint that genuine relationships of love contain a high degree of **honesty** and even a **readiness to confront our differences**. And you never suggest that sometimes real **love hurts**! Have you ever purchased a valentine card that ainted such a picture?

6) TRUE LOVE! But the bible paints such a picture! And we see God willingly and eagerly entering into a broken world full of broken people to graciously deal with our **sins** and **weaknesses**. God's love is neither **erotic** or **sentimental love**. God's love is **a love that suffers**, because those whom God loves – *you and me* - are very **hard to love**! **True love** has dark side to it! **True love** is **messy**! **True love** means **facing the truth** about ourselves and others! That's why many of us (in as much as we *need* love) – often **resist** God's love, *and* the love of others! **True love** is not for sissies! That's why many prefer the **“luv”** of sentimental cards. It doesn't **cost** us much! It doesn't **suffer**! But if you want to look at **true love** – **look up at the cross**!

7) DIVINE LOVE = JESUS CHRIST! See, God's love is revealed in **Jesus Christ**! In **Jesus**, we *discover* what Paul meant when he declares that love is **“patient... kind... not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude... not irritable or resentful... rejoices**

in the truth... bears all things... endures all things.” **Divine love** *pours itself out for others*. It is that **divine love** that is *unmotivated by any gain or need* for itself – that becomes the **foundation** for the love *we* are to express! God **commands us** to love – *not* because love can be *forced* upon others (it can’t)... no, love is **commanded** of us because we are **CAPABLE** of loving this way. It is a **real possibility** for us *in spite of* everything we put its way. Why? Because *we are already loved* by God. And when **Christ’s** Spirit comes to live **within us** – that which is *impossible* for us alone – is **now possible!** Or as John put it (1st John 4:19) **“We love because God first loved us!”** **Divine love** is revealed in **Jesus Christ!**

8) **SINNERS!** See, the “divine love” we’re *called into* - is neither *erotic* love nor *sentimental* “luv”. It is a love extended to us **despite** our sexuality, and it is extended to **“sinners”**. And **sinners** are not *only* the people who are *clearly and obviously wicked!* No, **sinners** includes **all** who are by nature **self-centered**. That makes us **a hard lot to love!** Yet, amazingly, **God’s love is for sinners!**

9) **LOVES US ANYWAY!** What amazes me, is that God desires to empower us with this love *without trampling* on us, **stamping out** our resistance, or **forcing us** to love! (Which as we said before, is *impossible!*) No, God’s love comes to us, always looking for a **beachhead** in our hearts. But He allows us to be *suspicious, express resistance*, and even our *hatred*. Unlike sentimental love, God’s love does **not conceal** or **minimize** all our sin. The *suspicious*, the *resistance*, the *hatred* are **permitted** to surface so that we can for the first time **really know ourselves** for *what* we are, and know that **despite that – He loves us anyway!**

10) **THE CROSS!** **The Cross** is what demonstrates the *lengths* to which God will go to **reach us, find the lost**, and to **restore broken relationships!** **The Cross** also represents the *grim extent* to which **we** go to **reject** such a love when it is offered to us! Ironically, it is in **the cross**, that this **honest confrontation** with God and our brokenness occurs, and we *begin* to learn what *true love* is!

11) **BEGINNING!** And I say **“begin”** because let’s face it: **no human love is perfect!** Any of you remember the old wedding song **“O Perfect Love”**? It was intended to explain **God’s love**, but usually people in the audience thought it represented the **“perfect love”** of the young married couple. Unfortunately, our *human* love is **never perfect**. Next to Christ’s *suffering* love, our loves are but *pale reflections!* That’s why Christians *perpetually confess our sins* – **admitting** we’ve failed to perfectly love God and our neighbors! Never-the-less, *it is* **a beginning!**

12) **MAKES A DIFFERENCE!** And it **DOES** **make a difference!** Christ’s love, living in our hearts, **reveals the difference** between a *“calculating”* love that is always aware of **“what’s in it for me”**, ...and a love that **“does not insist on it’s way.”** Christ’s love uncovers **the difference** between a love that is *only warm* and **glowing** the *first three years* of marriage, ...and the love that **“never ends”**. He exposes **the difference** between a love that is always *conscious of itself*, ...verses the love that **“rejoices in God’s truth”**. Jesus and the cross help us realize *the difference* between a love that *thinks* it has become **perfect**, ...and one that *knows* it is in its *infancy* - seeing only “in part”. Do you see **the difference** God’s love **makes?**

13) **A GIFT!** Now, just as we concluded that **faith**, and **hope** were **gifts** from God – and not something we were capable of *manufacturing* – **so it is with love!** If you walk home today saying, **“Wow, I’ve got to go home and will myself to love more!”** – then you are doomed to failure! But if you **turn to God** and *invite Him* to **come in and live within you** – *so too comes His love!* And that divine love begins to **transform** you, **direct** you, and **create within you** “*more love*”, an *overflowing* love that is *not human* in origin, but flows *into us*, then *through us* into the lives of others. Divine love is **a gift!** **A gift** God gives us to **experience** and then **pass on!**

14) **PENTECOST!** Today, on **Pentecost Sunday**, we usually preach on the **Holy Spirit** or the **Spiritual Gifts** that were given and that worked *through* the disciples to give **birth to the church!** But first step back and ask yourself; **why** were these Gifts and the Holy Spirit given? As an expression of **divine selfless love** - delivered to *broken, frail, and weak* human beings, that *other lost sheep* might also be touched by the **loving nature of God!** **Pentecost was another expression of the gift of love!** And the receiving of the **Holy Spirit** along with **Spiritual Gifts** **STILL IS!**

15) **THE GOD LIFE?** Here’s what’s sad: many of us *understand* the “concept” of God’s love – but we never-the-less **resist it**, and will not let it *grow within us*. We **fear** the **transformation** it might bring in our lives! *Why?* Because despite what our *heads* tell us, our *hearts fear* living **a life of love** like Christ’s! Sure we come to church and *receive* God’s blessings, but the idea of **dedicating our entire life** to *spreading God’s love* **petrifies** some of us! We may deny it, but many of us *prefer* and *chase after* what the world calls **the “Good life”**. We may give a *head nod* to God’s love, but we are **unwilling** or **unable** to *receive* or *give away* this gift because our hands are **already full** – grasping the things that promise us **the “Good life.”**

16) **SELF-SACRIFICING LOVE?** Let’s face it, we want **comfort**, we want **financial security**, we want to **avoid pain and suffering**, we want to **avoid the hard work** of understanding and accepting broken people right where they are! We **resist** giving our **complete life** over to Christ, because His kind of love **is messy!** It means **facing the truth about ourselves – and others!** Instead of **avoiding the darkness** we walk boldly **into it** – holding Christ’s hand and following Him into the **pain and suffering of others**. *Why would we want to do that?* Because **THAT’S REAL LOVE! It’s self-sacrificing love!** ... **concerned** about putting the *needs* of others before our own comfort! ... **sacrificing** in order to bring **Christ’s light and love** into dark and empty hearts! ... becoming **addicted** to the *constant joy* that comes from **pouring yourself out for others!** That’s **REAL LOVE! Self-sacrificing love!**

17) **REAL LOVE!** **Real love** is what happens when over 20 people spend their **Memorial Day Monday** *making and serving sandwiches to the homeless* – (which is what happened just this week!) **Real love** is what is expressed when time and resources are gladly given in grand quantities to *help a brother and sister from Tanzania get married in Washington DC!* **Real love** is a couple *giving up the exchange of Christmas presents*, so that **a life-changing charity** may benefit instead. It’s *visiting the hospital* when you’d rather be watching the game on TV. **Real love** is *reaching out to a changing neighborhood* and opening your doors to new cultures, in a way that requires **risk-taking**, dealing with **anxiety** concerning the unknown, and **constant sacrifice** – for no other reason than **God asked you to!**

18) REAL LOVE II. “Real love” is knowing that everything you have and are belongs to God, and faithful obedience to a giving and generous lifestyle is what makes God smile! Real love wears name tags and seeks out the visitors on Sunday morning, even though you’d rather be talking to your friends, because you **know God** drew those 1st time worshipper here for a reason – and it is **your calling** to discover what it is and to see to their needs! Real love doesn’t wait for the pastor or a committee to find out what happened to some one you haven’t seen in a while – it compassionately calls out of **genuine concern!** Real love doesn’t give a hoot about the budget, but it **gives generously** because of the difference their church makes in the lives of needy people, bringing them **hope** and **faith** and **love!**

19) REAL LOVE III. And as much as this may seem strange to some of us, **REAL LOVE** is **NOT** about the “**Good Life**” as described to us on TV – becoming captive to the constant maintenance and protection of our **increasing material possessions**, burdened by **rising financial debt**, all your precious time **spent at work** in order to pay for those glitzy but temporary pleasures, and the endless need to “keep up with the Jones!” Real love is expressed by those who listen to Jesus and seek to go against the grain of the world, actually seeking out a simpler life-style, uncluttered by a lot of unnecessary “stuff”, free to face the truth about us and this broken world! Real love doesn’t moan about the world’s brokenness – it asks God for **direction** and **guidance** that **injustice** might be challenged and corrected! Real love is **willing to suffer**, so that others don’t have to! Let me ask you – what is in your heart, is it **REAL LOVE?** **Christ’s love?** Or is it a worldly contented love centered around your own needs and comfort?

20) IT IS CHRIST! Friends, you were **created** by God for love! And **real love** is **messy** and **dirty** – **its concern is about the other!** It’s never-ending and unconditional – **even** when the other person is **obviously broken!** Real love is what happened up there (point to cross)! But as we learned from the Easter story – it is **truly life-giving** ...and the “rewards” of fearlessness, joy, and inner peace are **greater** than anything the world offers! My love, and your love, will never be as perfect as Christ’s was, but He is here this morning - to enter in and begin the transformation that **frees us from self!** Just like on the first Pentecost, **it is Christ** that **pours His Holy Spirit** into all open hearts, that you and I may **serve** and **touch lives** in amazing ways! When Christ **truly lives in us**, we can begin to experience and share a love that **1) does not insist on it’s own way, 2) never ends, 3) rejoices in the truth, and 4) recognizes it is only in it’s infancy – seeing and knowing “in part”**. Someday, when we walk through heaven’s gate – our love **will** be perfected. But then, as is now, **it is Christ** who brings us the life-giving gift of real love!

Praise God!

AMEN

Sermon/Confessional Prayer:

Dear Heavenly Father, we confess that there are times when we prefer the worldly definitions of love that allow us to chase after comfort, personal desires, and avoid the pain and suffering of others. We admit we prefer to avoid the hard work of understanding and accepting broken people right where they are! We resist giving our complete life over to you, because your kind of love is... well, it's messy! Forgive us Lord! And empower us to trust you so that we may open our hearts to the love that is life-giving!

Lord, forgive us for avoiding the divine love that reveals the truth about ourselves and others. Forgive us for not following you and walking into the darkness, pain, and suffering of others. Fill us instead with a radical love that puts the concerns of others before our own comforts. Empower us with a self-sacrificing love that brings your light and love into dark and empty hearts! Enable us to experience the constant joy that comes from pouring ourselves out for others!

And now Lord, although you know us better than we know ourselves, listen as we share in a moment of silence, those other parts of our lives that need to be forgiven, washed clean, healed, and recommitted to you! (made anew.)

(Silence)

Lord, we have only to look at the cross to see what true love is all about. Our hearts are open, come and enter in and begin the spiritual transformation that frees us from self! Until our love is perfected, help us to experience and share the love that brings the life-giving Spirit of Pentecost to all those around us! In Jesus Name We Pray. AMEN

Assurance of Forgiveness:

Friends, listen to the good news: The Lord, *whose Spirit provides the precious gift of love, ...that* Lord has mercifully heard your confession and eagerly forgives you all your sins. Go now, and remember – you were created to receive and give love! But not any kind of love – receive and share the love demonstrated on the cross! Christ's love! Praise God! AMEN

Opening prayer:

Dear Heavenly Father, for all the gifts we come here this morning to receive from you – whether it is forgiveness, healing, guidance, faith, or hope – the greatest gift we seek is love. Your love! A love far different from all other kinds. A life-giving love. A love some of us tend to take for granted – but it is a love that is forever, and unconditional! It is a love that brings us inner peace, eliminating our fears and anxieties. It is a gift that forgives, fills the emptiness in our hearts, and assures us that sin, Satan, and death will not have the final say in our lives! It is a love that mere words cannot describe – and yet we stand before you now ...wanting it, needing it, and with hearts open to receiving it! Pour your love upon us this morning! Let it fill us, and overflow into the lives of those

here, and into the lives of those we will meet this week! As we sing your praises and commune with you this morning – know that we love you – imperfectly to be sure – but we do love you. And we trust you will transform us with your love that we, as individuals and as a church family, might then in turn share the good news with those whose hearts have yet to experience and rejoice in your amazing love! In Jesus Name We Pray!
AMEN!