



Westminster
Presbyterian Church
NACOGDOCHES, TEXAS

Agape Love
First Corinthians 13

This coming Wednesday is Valentine's Day and, of course, everyone is invited to come tonight our annual Valentine Chili and Bingo Party, which is the social event of the year. We will be serving the best chili in town, and I understand we will have chili for our vegetarians. For a fund raiser, I am considering the idea of selling bottles of Tums or some other antacid on the side.

Since this is the week of valentines, it seemed appropriate for our text this morning to be First Corinthians 13, a text I hope you all know.

Several years ago a Presbyterian minister officiated at the wedding of a Hollywood film producer. The setting of the grand event was at a west coast mansion where those in attendance could see the magnificent view of the waves breaking on the rocks and cliffs of the Pacific Ocean.

Early in the service the mother of the bride stood up and read a poem she had written for the occasion. Everyone in attendance was so moved they gave a thunderous applause. "Oh, that was good!"

A little later as the minister began his remarks, he read First Corinthians 13: **"If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love I am nothing. . . ."** There was a stunned silence, followed by another thunderous applause. "Oh, that was good!" The problem was that the gathered congregation thought the minister had also written his own poem for the wedding. As a matter of fact, following the service, many of the guests asked for a copy of that wonderful poem.

It may be a sad commentary that the Hollywood crowd did not recognize the source of the minister's poem, but I am delighted that when they heard the New Testament definition of love they burst into applause.

First Corinthians 13 is often read at weddings and at funerals. It is an expression of what looks like rather than what it feels like. At a wedding, First Corinthians 13 is a challenge to the couple to remember that love is more than the romantic and lovely feelings that accompany love, but love has to be accompanied with loving actions. At a funeral First Corinthians is often read as a testimony to the witness of someone we love who challenges us to love as they did.

To better understand this text, let's take a look at its context. The ancient city of Corinth had its problems. The city's skyline was dominated by the Temple to Aphrodite, the goddess of love, boasting 1,000 sacred prostitutes. It was called "the love capital of the empire." Even the Greek verb, "*korinthiazo*," meant to live like a Corinthian. This simply meant to, how do I put it, it meant to make love.

The Corinthian church also had its problems. Paul was dismayed that in the church a man was having an affair with his stepmother, and no one seemed to give it any thought to this abomination. Church members were suing each other. And worship in the church was utter chaos.

In the course of his writing to the Corinthians, Paul dealt with a lot of problems in the church. He spoke of divisions and practices that were tearing the church apart. He wrote about those who felt they had superior gifts; he wrote about jealousies, self-promotion, and keeping score of old wrongs. And Paul had a solution; actually it is the only solution. First Corinthians 12 ends with these words, "And now, I will show you the most excellent way."

Then Paul wrote what is one of the most read and loved passages in all of Scripture, First Corinthians 13:

If I speak in the tongues of men or of angels, but do not have love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal. If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have a faith that can move mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. If I give all I

possess to the poor and give over my body to hardship that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing.

Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It does not dishonor others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres.

Love never fails. But where there are prophecies, they will cease; where there are tongues, they will be stilled; where there is knowledge, it will pass away. For we know in part and we prophesy in part, but when completeness comes, what is in part disappears. When I was a child, I talked like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I put the ways of childhood behind me. For now we see only a reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known. And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love.

Husbands, if you want to do something for Valentine's Day, you might consider making a CD of your wife's favorite love songs. Not revealing what I would put on the CD, one good one might be "Love is a Many Splendored Thing." You can't go wrong with that one. If you like the Beatles, how about, "All You Need is Love"? Then, of course, there is "What the World Needs Now is Love, Sweet Love," and how about "You're Nobody Till Somebody Loves You"?

I believe it was Aristotle who said, "If I can define your terms, I can agree with what you say." Well, if Paul could define the word "love," he would agree with the theology behind all these songs. I understand the best Greek word to describe love in our love songs would be *eros*, but I think Paul would have us substitute *eros* with the word *agape*.

Eros is a love which is determined by value. It is a love determined by what we find pleasing. It is a love defined by using the word "because." I love you because. . . . I love you because you are beautiful. I love you because you are rich.

I love you because you are my nonstop dream machine. I love you because you helped me when I was in need of help. I love you because . . . and fill in the blank.

The main problem with this *eros* is that it makes one feel as though they have to deserve love. Maybe this is why so many of us spend our lives on an endless campaign to make ourselves look worth loving. One example may be the Christmas letters we send.

Pauline Phillips, also known as Abigail Van Buren, whom we refer to as Dear Abby, once ran a parody of the kind of Christmas letters we send each other: "Dear Friends, what a great year! Jim was named vice president of the bank! We celebrated by buying a Mercedes and flying off to the Orient. In addition to his Boy Scout work, Jim was co-chairman of the United Fund Drive. He continues on the board of Grace Hospital and is treasurer of Rotary. His first love, however, remains the environment, and he is heading up the Committee to Fight Dutch Elm disease. After completing my term as Junior League President, I swore I'd take life easy, but I am more involved than ever. I accepted the vice presidency of the Garden Club and am still active in the DAR. I ran the bake sale for the Eastern Star again and I also squeezed in a flower arranging class offered by a Japanese exchange student. All this with my leg in a cast. Dumb me fell off a ladder while hanging curtains at the homeless shelter." Now you have to be honored and loved to be able to claim a person who can honestly write such a letter as your friend.

However, someone who's had it with this kind of Christmas letter says why not say it like it really is: "Dear Friends, We've had a rotten year. Bill was passed over for promotion again so he quit his job. He hasn't lined up anything yet but he's listed with the unemployment agencies and looks in the want ads every day. In the meantime, he is drinking like a fish. . . ." and on and on. We cannot make ourselves worthy of love no matter how hard we try, because, in fact, no one is worthy of love.

The problem with *eros*, that is, I love you because, is that it quickly turns into I love you as long as. . . as long as you are beautiful, as long as you are rich, as long as you meet my needs.

In First Corinthians 13, Paul tells us about another type of love – the Greek word is *agape*. If *eros* is I love you because, *agape* is, “I love you in spite of. . .” I love you in spite of your problems. I love you in spite of your temper. I love you in spite of the fact that you no longer look like you did twenty-five years ago when we were married.”

C. S. Lewis wrote, “*Eros* love is need love. You and I are born into this world as helpless bundles of needs and we love those things and those people that meet our needs.”

Agape love, rather than need love, is giving love. It moves from the inward to the outward. *Agape* love is based on who we are, and not on the worthiness or unworthiness of the other person. Whereas *eros* is based on the value we can receive from someone or something, that is, I love you because you have value to me, *agape* does not seek value, but it gives value.

When I was a child I slept with a floppy eared stuffed dog. I don’t remember a time when I did not have that dog around, so I don’t remember if I gave the dog the name “Honey” or if someone else did. As with many boys, I could get rough with my other stuffed animals. I would pretend they were football players and I would viciously tackle them and throw them across the room, but not Honey. That stuffed animal which I so loved I always treated gently. Sometimes I had to attack the other animals to protect Honey.

Over the years the little bell in one of her ears fell out. One of eyes fell off. The thing got so dirty that my mother put it into the washing machine and all the stuffing fell out of Honey. My mom re-stuffed Honey and sewed her back together, and it wasn’t until I was an adult that she told me what happened. She did not think I could handle the sad news that Honey fell apart in the wash.

In reality Honey was a dirty, worn, stuffed animal, basically a rag, and what do you do with a bundle of dirty rags? You throw it in the trash. However, that was unthinkable and even blasphemous to me because at a deeper reality. I loved Honey and that floppy eared dog was one of my greatest joys. I loved Honey in

spite of the fact she had lost an eye and a bell and was falling apart. She was in fact of great value because of the love a little boy.

If you want to know the rest of the story, my little brother who is eleven years younger than me, stole Honey, and I still love my brother in spite of the fact that Honey is still around, but resides in his home.

God's love, *agape*, is like that crazy illogical love of a child for his floppy eared stuffed dog. Even though we soil ourselves and, in Isaiah's words, "our righteousness is as filthy rags," for some crazy reason originating in the mysterious depths of God's heart, you and I are treasured and beloved enough for the Creator to enter into this world and to be stretched out on a cross.

God loves because it is in God's character to love, and it is *agape* love, love based not upon the attributes, favors, value or what we can get out of the object of our love. No, God's love is solely based on God. God loves because God loves. Even we when go astray, God loves. When we are stained with transgression God loves. Jesus gave the picture of the prodigal who told his father in so many words, "Dad, if you were dead, I would get a certain amount of inheritance, but since you are not dead yet, and I want to get out of your house, will you go ahead and give me what will be mine?" And the waiting father was there when his son returned home. The father loved the unlovable boy, for no other reason that it was in his character. His love was not based on his son's actions, but on the fact that his son was his son.

In describing this love, Paul gave some very practical descriptions. "Love is patient, love is kind." Then comes this string of negatives: "Love does not envy, it does not boast..." Here Paul is brilliantly practical because he put his finger on those negative qualities that we love to use as weapons in our intimate warfare with others: "It is not rude, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs." It's like the exasperated husband who said to his wife, "Why do you keep bringing up the past? I thought you told me that you'd forgiven and forgotten." His wife said, "I have forgiven and forgotten. I just don't want you to forget that I've forgiven and forgotten." Love keeps no record of wrongs. How practical can you get? "Love endures all things..." Love is that man sitting in the

mall waiting on that hard bench while his wife shops and shops and shops. When a group of third graders were asked, “What is love?” a little girl replied, “When my grandmother got arthritis, she couldn't bend over and paint her toenails anymore. Now my grandfather does it for her all the time, even though his hands have arthritis too.”

My father penned the very best definition of love I have ever read. I have used this illustration before, but I love telling it, so I hope you will bear with me.

You must first remember that my mother gave birth to a basketball team. I had no sisters but I have four brothers – five boys in all. My father wrote: “As a parent loves the child, as the husband loves his wife, so God loves His own. Yet God’s love far exceeds all human love. Let me illustrate what it all means to me. All day long the kids have acted, actually and literally, like little devils. They began the day with a big argument at the breakfast table, which resulted in the throwing of breakfast cereal by the spoonful at one another and it is finally settled with a belt properly administered. (I guess discipline was a little different back in the 50’s and 60’s.) The baby (yours truly) tucked a half-gallon can of syrup under his arm and walked through the living room, leaving a trail behind, climaxed by emptying the whole can on the new living room rug. One broke mother’s favorite vase with a baseball bat, while another was in the bathroom pouring her bottle of favorite perfume in the sink because the hole on top was the right size to put doodlebugs in.

“Confined to their rooms, two drew pictures on the bedroom paper with crayons, while the others in a pillow fight broke the ceiling light fixture, which fell to the floor shattering into a thousand pieces.

“In desperation they were driven outside where they threw mud pies at the wash on the line and it had to be redone. The little one tested my shock proof watch, only to find out that it can shatter into a thousand pieces when it is slung across the room. One got the idea of drawing a target on the back window screen with soap and they shot out four window panes with their BB guns trying to hit the bull’s eye.

“The little one decided to hoe the strawberries but, unable to decide what is strawberry and what is weed, he hoed them all down. The others decided to wash the car and used the hose both on the exterior and the interior of the car.

“Finally, in the wise providence, goodness and mercy of God, the sun sets. Now, what they deserved, their just reward for such a day, by all rights, they should be given a good, sound beating and sent to bed without their supper. That was all they could rightly claim, and even at that they would be getting off pretty light.

“But what happened when night came? Mother washed them and they looked so clean and sweet and innocent that after a good supper she gave them ice cream for dessert. She read them a story and gently tucked them into bed after giving each a long hug and goodnight kiss. And why? Because she loves them. In spite of what they do she loves them with her body and soul, and actually gave herself for them, her youth, her beauty, her health, and her life for theirs. It’s not what they had coming, not their due, but rather it is the free, unmerited, undeserving gift of her great love for them.”

Like the Newton family in which I grew up, you and I still spend much of our lives acting like little devils, but God still loves us and still longs for our love in response. We are in fact called to be disciples. We are freed from the dominion of sin and freed to serve Christ. In the light of such amazing love, God’s love that gives each of us infinite worth, what will be your response?

Wednesday is Valentine’s Day. But when it comes to really understanding what love is, and how we are called to love in response to God’s love, I hope you will take time to listen to God as he speaks to you through the text of First Corinthians 13. Amen.

