

“Who Is Your Greatest Lover?”

“*God is love.*” (1 John 4:8, ESV)

In today’s culture a lot of focus in the month of February is upon the celebration of (St.) Valentine’s Day. For romance is of great interest to human beings – countless songs, books, and entertainment skits have been written about this subject down through history. On top of that, this light-hearted celebration, which originally commemorated a Christian bishop and martyr, can be a great diversion from the doldrums and cabin fever often experienced at this time of the year by those living in northern climates. And let us not forget (of course) that Valentine’s Day also is a money maker – and mammon is loved, trusted, and adored by sinful man every day of the year.

Will love, then, be the church’s focus this month? Absolutely! But what kind of love? In Greek, the language in which the New Testament was originally written, there is more than one word for “love.” One of those words is “eros” –which is the root for our English word “erotic.” And “eros” deals with sensual, romantic, and sexual love. In fact, “Eros” was the Greek “god of love.” And in many ways, “eros” has become the main type of love associated with Valentine’s Day, and therefore an emphasis upon “eros” looms large in our culture throughout the month of February (especially during the middle of the month). And within God’s created boundary of marriage (and I’m talking about the Biblical definition of marriage, not the warped legalized union between sodomites which has sinfully been given the status of “marriage” in our country), “eros” is a love that God has gifted to husbands and wives. But is it the type of love that the church will be focusing upon this month as we gather together?

Obviously the answer to the question I just raised is “no.” For even though Satan and his earthly emissaries would like to turn the church into some sort of bawdy house where erotic perversion takes up all the oxygen in the room (and in some denominations this demonic emphasis has produced a huge distraction and gained a significant foot hold), yet God would have His people focus upon love when they gather in worship - but a different (and greater) form of love. Two Greek words for love that appear quite often in the New Testament are “phileo” and “agape.” And these two words deal with deep and genuine compassion & concern for others. Some grammarians claim that the two words are more or less synonymous, while others believe that there are clear distinctions between the two words. I’m not getting into this debate in this article, but suffice it to say that God repeatedly encourages both “phileo” and “agape” love throughout the New Testament.

So, what are some examples of “phileo” and “agape” in the New Testament? Here are two verses where the English word interpreted “love” comes from the Greek word “phileo.” ***“If anyone has no love for the Lord, let him be accursed” (1 Corinthians 16:22a, ESV).*** ***“For the Father loves the Son and shows Him all things that He Himself does” (John 5:20a, Modern English Version).*** And here are two verses where the English word interpreted “love” comes from the Greek word “agape.” ***“For God is not unrighteous so as to forget your work and the love which you have shown toward His name, in having ministered and continuing to minister to the saints” (Hebrews 6:10, Legacy Standard Bible).*** ***“Who shall separate us from the love of Christ?” (Romans 8:35a, KJV).*** “Agape” is also the word for love used throughout 1 Corinthians 13 (which has been dubbed the love chapter of the Bible), and is also the word for love in the theme passage for this article (1 John 4:8). And interestingly, in John 21:15-17, both

“agape” and “phileo” are used for “love” in the question and answer exchange between Jesus and Peter.

See, the love that God’s church focuses upon in February (and every month) is a deep and enduring love – a love that ultimately has its source in the One who *“is love.”* For *“in this is love: not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins” (1 John 4:10, Modern English Version).* This obviously is the love that God showed for us when He sent His Son in our human flesh – being born that first Christmas. It’s also the love that has been revealed throughout the Season of Epiphany as the person and mission of God’s Son, our Messiah, has been manifested to us through His Word. And we will see this same love of God at work throughout our forty day Lenten journey which begins this month. For we sinners, who are *“but dust and ashes” (Genesis 18:27, ESV)* by nature, have been redeemed from our sins, rescued from death and the devil, and reconciled with our Creator by the life, suffering, and death of our God and Savior, Jesus Christ. For He who sacrificed His life into death to save us was triumphant in His mission. His bodily resurrection three days later shows that He indeed is the victor.

And this Good News, the Gospel, is now the means by which God gives the deliverance and unending life that Jesus earned for us. For through this Gospel, in Word and Sacrament, the Lord Himself offers His salvation, as well as creates (and sustains) through this same Gospel the faith which receives the saving grace He offers. For through His loving work He declares us holy, brings us into His kingdom, and makes us His own children (and therefore new people). What a truly loving God! No one else could or does love us more!

“Beloved, if God so loved us, we must also love one another. No one has seen God at any time. If we love one another, God dwells in us, and His love is perfected in us. We know that we live in Him, and He in us, because He has given us His Spirit. And we have seen and testify that the Father sent the Son to be the Savior of the world. Whoever confesses that Jesus is the Son of God, God lives in him, and he in God. And we have come to know and to believe the love that God has for us. God is love. Whoever lives in love lives in God, and God in him. In this way God’s love is perfected in us, so that we may have boldness on the Day of Judgment, because as He is, so are we in this world. There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear, because fear has to do with punishment. Whoever fears is not perfect in love. We love Him because He first loved us” (1 John 4:11-19, Modern English Version).

My brothers and sisters in Christ, it’s not wrong to enjoy the romance of Valentine’s Day – provided, of course, we do so in accordance with God’s plan for this type of love. But as we gather together for worship as God’s people throughout February, our focus will be upon the unconditional, incomprehensible, and everlasting love that God has for us in Christ crucified and risen. For He promises to shower us with His undeserved love and mercy through His Means of Grace every week. And this undeserved love and mercy enables us to confess the message of God’s love to others, as well as empowers us to love our neighbor as we journey through this world. And God’s undeserved love and mercy shall also strengthen and preserve us, His church, unto life everlasting in the resurrection paradise which He has promised. Beyond any doubt, *“God is love.”*

See you in church,

Pastor

Postscript: Just a reminder, Ash Wednesday will be Wednesday, February 22nd. Our joint worship service for Ash Wednesday will be at St. Paul's, starting at 7PM. As in years past, the mid-week joint Lenten worship services will be on Wednesday evenings at 7PM, alternating each week between the two congregations ~ Pastor.

Psalm Readings for February

WEEK ONE: Sunday, February 05: PSALM 41; Monday, February 06: PSALM 42; Tuesday, February 07: PSALM 43; Wednesday, February 08: PSALM 44; Thursday, February 09: PSALM 45; Friday, February 10: PSALM 46; Saturday, February 11: PSALM 47

WEEK TWO: Sunday, February 12: PSALM 48; Monday, February 13: PSALM 49; Tuesday, February 14: PSALM 50; Wednesday, February 15: PSALM 51; Thursday, February 16: PSALM 52; Friday, February 17: PSALM 53; Saturday, February 18: PSALM 54

WEEK THREE: Sunday, February 19: PSALM 55; Monday, February 20: PSALM 56; Tuesday, February 21: PSALM 57; Wednesday, February 22: PSALM 58; Thursday, February 23: PSALM 59; Friday, February 24: PSALM 60; Saturday, February 25: PSALM 61

WEEK FOUR: Sunday, February 26: PSALM 62; Monday, February 27: PSALM 63; Tuesday, February 28: PSALM 64; Wednesday, March 01: PSALM 65; Thursday, March 02: PSALM 66; Friday, March 03: PSALM 67; Saturday, March 04: PSALM 68:1-18