

1 John 4: 7-21
John 15: 1-11
May 3, 2015
Hamilton Union Presbyterian Church

Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God. Whoever does not love does not know God for God is love. (1 John 4:7-8)

In his book, The Four Loves, C.S. Lewis identifies two categories of love: gift love and need love. Simply put, “gift love” is that desire which is directed toward the benefit of someone or something else for its own sake. “Need” love is the seeking *from* something or someone else some sign of affirmation or affection.

Even in 1960 when Lewis wrote the book it was taken for granted that “gift love” was *good* and “need love” was *bad*. Actually, it was called *selfish*; but we all knew that selfish was just another word for bad. As a result, many of us grew up believing that it was selfish to pray to God about our own concerns. We only prayed for others. For me the impression was deepened every Sunday when the offering was introduced with Jesus’ words, “It is better to give than to receive.” As an adult I recognize that Jesus did not say, “It is good to give and bad to receive.” Yet the cumulative effect of all these messages convinced me that this is what was Jesus meant.

In the 1970’s and, one could argue, right up to the present moment, the culture has rebelled against this idea that we should live our lives for the common good. Our political culture seems to be based on the idea that only laws and national policy should be approved which are good *for me and the people who agree with me*. With millions of competing agendas and needs and no overall consensus about what is good for the whole of society, no wonder

there is political grid-lock! Well may we blame politicians; but until we the people become willing to broaden the scope of our conversations to include what might be good for *others*, there will be no compromise in Albany or Washington. But I digress.

The point is that we are confused about what love is and is not. This confusion is spiritually detrimental to us as individuals and even more as a community. Thus we may hear the words of John, "let us love one another for love is from God" and wonder, "what does he mean?" What is this love we are urged to give?

When John uses the word which is translated "love" he uses the Greek word *agape*. There are several words in Greek which we translate as *love*. The most common words are *eros* and *phillios*. We get our word *erotic* from the first word; but this is not the full meaning of *eros*. I propose that when we use the word *love* it is *eros* that we draw upon; for *eros* encompasses all that we are passionate about. I *love* reading, the impressionist colors of early spring, walking on the beach, browsing used book stores, listening to music, savoring the textures and flavors of food. I love doing meaningful things, having ideals to live up to. I burn with anger at injustice. I am passionate about serving with you in Christ's ministry. All of these things are what the Greeks meant by *eros*. They are all *good*. But they are not to be confused with *agape*.

The word *phillios* has the sense of what we used to call "brotherly love". It is the love of friendship. Friendship is perhaps the most tender and highest of the human emotions. It describes reciprocal and mutual respect and affection, a mutual reliance upon one another. It describes a willingness to share one another's joys and sorrows and to serve one another. True friendship grows under adversity and may even lead to giving one's life for a friend. It is the bond that men and women who serve in combat understand better than most of us.

When the community of faith is at its best it is a community of *philiros*. We share a mutual respect and affection. We are bound to one another by the high calling of serving and proclaiming Jesus Christ. We share each other's joys and tragedies and savor the ordinary pleasures of being in each other's company. In a world which is so impersonal and demanding, a world where every relationship is determined by what another person or government can do *for me*, communities of *philiros* are not only good—they are essential. But they are not communities of *agape*.

To use Lewis' categories, *agape* is pure gift love. It is what motivated God to create the universe in all its beauty and glory. It is what motivated God to create human beings to enjoy and experience God's delight. It is what motivated God to give people the freedom to discover God's inexhaustible love. Just because. It is this deep desire to share this love that led God to send his son Jesus into the world to be the way for us to overcome the barriers of self-oriented love and to abide in God's love as a branch is inescapably part of the vine. But if this is so, how do mere humans love one another in this way? How do we love another—no matter who they are and whether we like them or not, whether we agree with them or not?

The humbling news is that we cannot of ourselves love in this way. To pretend that we love as God does and as Jesus did is as spiritually dangerous as living only to gratify our own needs and desires. Few people are colder than the ones who with no humility tell us they love with the love of Jesus.

The good news is that God knows this. Indeed God created us with what Lewis calls, "need love." Need love is that in us which awakens in us a deep awareness that we cannot love as God does. But need love does not leave us in a state of self-judgment and isolation. This

same, God-created and God-inspired need love causes us to turn to God to seek God's help. It is this sacred experience of our need for God that helps us to turn from our fear, self-condemnation and despair to the embracing love of God. To help us to do this God sent Jesus so that we can turn to him in the full confidence that when we turn to Jesus we are coming to God.

This, friends is what I understand John to mean when he urges us to love one another with the love that comes from God. It is first of all to be our unique and beautiful selves, grateful for the amazing gift of life. It is to seek to grow in our experience of the fact that this life-gift is alive and ongoing in and among us every minute of every day. Yet it is also to freely admit that there are many times when we *do not love*. When we do not love—when we are full of resentment of others and self-denunciation we are cut off from God and literally do not *know* his love.

It is then that the Holy Spirit awakens in us our recognition that apart from the love that is God, our lives are cold and empty and bitter. It is then that our God given *need for God* causes us to turn with trust to him who made us and in Jesus gives us the grounds to trust that in him we are never condemned.

Indeed to turn to God in repentance and trust is the greatest gift to God we can ever give. Amen.