

First Presbyterian Church
Bozeman, Montana
Dan Krebill, co-pastor

September 30, 2018
26th Sunday in Ordinary Time
1 John 4:13-21

First Love

Earlier this month, we launched the theme that will be our focus for the coming months and into next spring. Learning and Living God's Love, Together. It's a theme that has multiple facets to it. It's our hope that as we delve into this emphasis that we might come to a better and deeper understanding of love, and that we will be able to live it out more fully as the people of God in this place.

When we consider love, it is a topic of human attention that is almost unparalleled as far as the level of interest that is generated.

For those of us in middle age and on up in years will remember a time when there was no internet and world wide web. So when they came along—the internet and world wide web that is—search engines were developed to make sense of the vast array of information available. There were a whole bunch of different ones out there for awhile, but eventually one with the goofy name Google reined supreme and dominates to this day. So dominant that it has become a verb as well as a proper noun. To google is to perform a search of the world wide web. As a preacher it has been fun to have Google available to do various kinds of research.

So I found it very interesting that when I typed the word "Love" into Google, it returned 10,760,000,000 results. That's right—10.7 billion with a "B" results. Now there's a lot of information on the web for sure. But I was taken aback at this huge number. So I thought I'd try a couple of other words. The word "Fear" returned 775,000,000 results which is only 7% as many as love. The word "Hatred" returned 55,800,000 results, only 5% as many as love. And even the word, "Sex" returned 2,970,000,000 results which is less than 30% as many as love.

Now there is nothing scientific about the results of my very basic web search. But I do think that it confirms that love in all its various forms and manifestations in our world is of great interest to us since it has resulted in such an enormous amount of material available on it.

The word "love" in the English language can have all sorts of meanings attached to it. One dictionary has 14 definitions for love as a noun, and another 6 definitions for love as a verb—20 definitions in all. (www.dictionary.com)

Perhaps the most common or one of the most common uses of the word love in our culture has to do with interpersonal relationships in general and more specifically romantic relationships. As long as I'm talking about Google and the internet, I should bring up social media as well. Social media sites like Facebook, Twitter, Instagram among others have user profiles in which a person can choose whether or not they want to share their relationship status. Among the ever increasing number of options one can choose for one's relationship status is one that is simply, "it's complicated."

Love is complicated whether we're talking about interpersonal relationships, romance, love within a family, or God's love in the church family. It's complicated.

When it comes to the Bible as it's translated into English, love can become complicated in that there are multiple words in Hebrew in the Old Testament and multiple words in Greek in the New Testament that are all translated into the English word "love." So it's important that as we study the

Bible and seek to understand what it has to say about love, we must be clear on what is behind the word on the page.

Eros is the first Greek word that is translated into love is one that refers to sexual or romantic love. It is perhaps the kind of love that is celebrated or referred to in so much music, poetry, and literature over the ages. When we consider those 10.7 billion Google references, this kind of love is likely the most prevalent.

Philia is the second Greek word that is translated into love and is the one that refers to the love we have for one another in a family or family-like group. It's the root word in the city name Philadelphia which is known as the City of Brotherly Love. This is also a kind of love or an aspect of love that we talk a lot about in our discussions of civil society and in how we should treat one another.

The third word that is translated into love is one that didn't get much use in the Greek-speaking world until the Christians came along. It's the word *agape*. It's this love that we read about in 1 John chapter 4. *Agape* in its most pure form is understood as the love that God has showered down upon us since the beginning of creation.

All three of these words for love are found in the Bible. All three of them are absolutely correctly rendered as love in the English language. And all three of them are good. Love is good as romantic love, brotherly or sisterly love, or as God's love.

It's this *agape* love that is at the heart of what I'm talking about today and it is also at the center of most of what we'll be focusing on this year.

There is not a more succinct chapter in all of the Bible that more clearly speaks of and describes God's love than this second part of the 4th chapter of the First Letter of John. While we didn't read it today, we did read it two weeks ago during our kick off Sunday. "Beloved, let us love one another because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love." (1 Jn. 4:7-8) Could there be a more simple and straightforward sentence than that? "God is love."

This simple statement, "God is love," is a fundamental theological assertion that is at the foundation of everything else there is to say about Christian belief and theology. When we remember this foundational truth, God is love, then we're likely to get the rest of it right

It's when we forget this basic starting point, God is love, that we can get way off base in what it means to be a Christian and to live a Christian life. I said it two weeks ago. And I feel the need to say it again today, that over the course of Christian history, we have been tempted to make Christianity more about right behavior and correct belief that *results* in God's love rather than the other way around where God is love is the *starting point* that then leads to us living lives of gratitude and thanksgiving. Our theology and our Christian living are in response to God's first love.

Another important aspect of this *agape* love that is God, is that it is love that gives without expecting a return. It is not a *quid pro quo*; or as the dictionary defines it, "a favor or advantage granted or expected in return for something."

Pastor William Self puts it this way, that we have "to deal with those who try to redefine the nature of God. Some say God is fear; others say that God is light; but the gospel says that God is love. All God's activity is loving activity. If God creates, God does it in love. If God rules, God does it in love. If God judges, God does it in love. God cannot help it—God is love. The gospel answer to the human

problem of anxiety, mortality, and meaninglessness is simple—God is love. Dare we preach it in any other way? In this world of impersonal forces, ruthless power, and extremely complicated international issues, some may want another gospel, but to proclaim anything less than the heart of the universe as being a pulse of mercy with infinite passion is to betray the gospel.” (*Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary, Year B, Vol. 2*, David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, gen. eds., © 2008 Westminster John Knox Press, p. 469)

As we read, “There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear; for fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not reached perfection in love. We love because he first loved us.” (1 Jn. 4:18-19)

My friends in Christ, it is critically important in this time and place that we embrace this truth and incorporate it into our daily living. “There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear.” This assertion while being so basic to our Christian faith—something that may be part of your Christian DNA—has become counter cultural to what our world is telling us today. Fear is all around us, especially in those who have no strong connection to our God who is love. Fear is spreading its tentacles into nearly every aspect of our lives. We must not be drawn into this fear and dragged down by this fear. Rather we must double down on this fundamental Christian assertion that is at the heart of the faith that God has instilled in us. God is love and perfect love casts out fear.

Being the last day of September today, we are on the cusp of October, the time in the life of the church where we look ahead to what God is calling us to do in the new year coming in 2019. At the heart of our work as First Presbyterian Church is to ensure that our strong voice of proclaiming God’s love as an antidote to fear remains clear and strong and is even strengthened.

Our financial stewardship campaign begins this week when you’re being asked to show your love for God, in response to God’s first love, by making your first gift to God by way of a financial pledge to the church. When I say first gift, I don’t mean to suggest that you haven’t given before. What I do mean is what was done in the earliest days, the people of God would make their first gift to the temple or church before they made gifts to anything else. It was the first gift because it was the most important gift given in response to God’s love. Please prayerfully consider how you will make your first gift to God through your pledge to First Presbyterian Church.

There is so much more to say about God’s first love. The wonderful thing today is that we have many more Sundays ahead of us when we will be further exploring this as we engage in Learning and Living God’s love, together.

I invite you to turn to your bulletin cover, and stand, as you’re able, and recite with me this paragraph from our church’s *Confession of 1967* proclaiming our belief.

“The new life takes shape in a community in which people know that God loves and accepts them in spite of what they are. They therefore accept themselves and love others, knowing that no one has any ground on which to stand, except God’s grace.” (from *The Confession of 1967*, alt.)