

Love. When I say that word as a 21st century American, I have real problems. Love. We use the word to mean so many different things. I love my wife. I love chocolate. I love sleeping in on a Saturday morning. Those are three very different kinds of feelings that we describe with the word 'love.'

Also, in our culture, we often use the word love when we really mean something else. Think of the old song by the Doors: "Hello, I love you, won't you tell me your name." Or, if you don't like classic rock, think of the country equivalent by Alan Jackson: "I'm in love with you baby, and I don't even know your name." Now I ask you, how can you possibly love someone without even knowing their name? It's impossible.

Those songs say, "Love." But they really mean something other than love. They really are talking about desire, or attraction, or lust, but it's not love.

Also, think about how casually we throw the word 'love' around. Remember the commercial a decade ago. Some guys are out camping. And one says, very emphatically, "I love you man." To which the other guy replies, "Thanks, but you can't have my beer." Saying, "I love you" in this case isn't sincere. It's merely a way of being manipulative, of trying to get something out of someone else.

Then we have a holiday like Mother's Day today. Mothers are certainly known being loving. There are a few mothers who fall short, but by and large, Mother love is a strong form of love.

So when we hear "love" in our New Testament readings, how should we interpret them?

Last week we heard from 1John that, "God is love." God is love.

Those 3 words are so simple that a 3 year old can understand them: God is love. And yet, because of our culture, because of the different meanings we attach to that word, love, many adults fail to hear or to understand, or to believe those words.

God is love. It's true. But the word we translate as "love" is very specific here. In NT times, the Greek language had numerous different words to describe things that we lump all together and call, "Love."

I've preached about seven of those words for love before, so I won't go into great detail. If you want to look it up, look on our website--August 24 of last year. But I'll just mention a couple highlights.

First off, there was Phileo. That's where the name of the city, "Philadelphia" comes from. Some of you may have learned in school, Philadelphia means the "city of brotherly love." When the Greeks used the word, Phileo, they meant the kind of feelings you have for friends, or for brothers and sisters. Friendship. Brotherly, sisterly love. Phileo.

The Greeks also used the word, Eros. Eros is the root of our word erotic. This word describes desire, sexual attraction, romance, lust, all those things we often label as love, but are really different from real love. Actually, we live in a culture that spends a lot of time worshiping and pursuing Eros. We spend an inordinate amount of time trying to satisfy our every desire. This may be Eros, but it's not love in the New Testament sense, and given our culture, we need to be careful to remember that.

That doesn't mean that sex and romance and all the other aspects of Eros are bad. When kept in perspective they're wonderful. They can be healthy and joyful gifts from God. But they're not love, at least not in the sense that the NT is using the word.

When the writers of the NT talked about Christian love, or the love of God, they used a different word. They used the word Agape.

Agape was actually a rather uncommon Greek word. It originally described the love of a superior for an inferior. It described a love in which a stronger person sacrificed power on behalf of someone weaker. Agape, in Greek, meant a love that was self sacrificing. A love which was interested in giving. It's 180° opposite to the guy in the beer commercial saying, "I love you, man" in order to get something. Agape was about the other, not about the self.

So when John writes, "God is Love, God is Agape," that says something amazing about the nature of God. It describes God's love in terms of gift and self sacrifice.

If we say that 'God is love,' then everything else we say about God flows from this definition. God creates in love. God rules in love. God judges the living and the dead in love. But most importantly, God sends his only Son in love.

God's love is supremely made visible and manifest in his sending of Jesus Christ to be our savior. God takes the first step. God sends the Son, not because of anything we do, not because of our love for him, but because he first loved us.

And because we ARE loved, we have a response to make. We hear this in our Gospel this morning. Jesus says, "This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you."

We ARE loved by God. Therefore, in response, we are called TO love. We are called to love God. And we are called to love each other.

What John is telling us is this: Christianity is not simply a matter of loving God. Christianity is not simply about having a personal relationship with Jesus and ignoring everyone else. If we love God, then in response to God's love we are called to love each other as well.

We heard this in our Epistle last week. 1John lets us know this in no uncertain terms: "If someone says, 'I love God,' but hates their brother or sister, that person is a liar; for if we don't love people we can see, how can we love God, whom we have not seen? And God himself has commanded that we must love not only him, but our brothers and sisters too."

Love God. Love your neighbor.

The shape of the cross is a continual reminder to Christians that there are two directions involved in Christianity. We have the vertical dimension of loving God. But there is also the horizontal dimension of loving each other. Love the Lord your God, Jesus tells us. But also, love your neighbor as yourself. It is on these 2 things that the rest of scripture depends. If we say we love God without loving our neighbors, John tells us that the truth is not in us.

It's not just a matter of having friendly feelings toward others. In truth, you can love someone without feeling friendly toward them. You can love someone without even liking them. Because love, at heart, is not about the way you feel. It's about what you do.

Love, in the NT sense, is a matter of sacrificing ourselves on behalf of others. In our Gospel, Jesus says, "No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends." Jesus is talking about sacrifice when he speaks of love. Giving up one's own life. Dying for someone else. That's the supreme act of love, Jesus says.

Today is Mother's Day. A day of love. But in a couple of weeks we celebrate another day of love. On Memorial Day, we will honor those who have acted lovingly. We will remember those who have laid down their lives for their friends--those who have sacrificed their lives on behalf of others.

So when you think of love in the NT sense, don't think of a Romance novel. Don't think of a heart shaped box of chocolate. Instead, think of a military cemetery. Instead, think of a man nailed to a cross. That's a picture of true sacrifice.

Real love is costly. Real love involves sacrifice. Real love is concerned with the other, not with the self.

Loving is never easy. Like everything else in this life, it takes practice. One learns to love by loving. Yet, we also love because we are loved. We are able to love because God gives us the power to love.

"Beloved, let us continue to love on another, for love comes from God."

And God is love.