



**Saint John United Methodist Church**  
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**Message for July 16, 2023**  
**“Grace: The Way of Love”**  
**Speaker: Rev. Dr. Iosmar Alvarez**  
**Scripture: 1 Corinthians 13:13, John 13:34-35**

Dear beloved congregation, today we gather to explore a timeless truth that resonates within our hearts – the concept of Love. Love has been the foundation of our faith, as exemplified by God's endless grace. When we talk about Love, we often think about it in a romantic context. But Love is so much more than that. Love is a fundamental human emotion that has the power to transform lives and relationships of all kinds. However, as we reflect on 1 Corinthians 13:13 and John 13:34-35, we discover an intricate mosaic of Love painted by the Divine. This Love, encompassing both the New and Old Testaments, reveals the way of God. So, let us embark on this journey together, seeking to understand the importance of Love, its practical application, and ultimately, Love as the way of God.

### **Principle 1: The Importance of Love**

We begin by acknowledging that Love holds a position of paramount importance in our faith. In 1 Corinthians 13:13, the apostle Paul declares, "And now these three remain faith, hope, and Love. But the greatest of these is Love." Love stands above all, illuminating the path we tread. Without Love, our faith lacks substance, and our hope grows dim. Yet, when we embrace Love, we become instruments of God's grace, shining His light in a broken world.

I am a world traveler. I love to see God's moving in different contexts and ways that either affirm or challenge my theology and understanding of our Father and the Scriptures. There are three types of cultures worldwide: Autonomous, Heteronomous, and Theonomous. Autonomous cultures are self-governing and independent. In contrast, Heteronomous cultures rely on an elite for guidance and direction, dictating what the majority would do or not do. Theonomous cultures are directed by a particular faith or system of beliefs, like in Ancient Israel before the human kingdom era.

In twenty-two years of serving as a missionary to America, I have found that our American culture combines aspects of the Autonomous and the Heteronomous cultures. For example, the Heteronomous side of American culture is revealed when the powers that be, regardless of political affiliations, try, again and again, to dictate how the American people should live their lives. On the other hand, Autonomous aspects of our culture are often found in our tendency to define grace, holiness, Love, and much more based on our cultural understanding and personal preferences rather than the Scriptures. We are disciples of Christ, and as such, we are expected as believers in the Triune God to use the Bible as our norm for Christian living, not the world's standards.

Today, we aim to re-establish the bases and definitions of Love in the kingdom of God from a Christ-centered perspective and beyond personal opinions. We, the church of Christ, are called to be countercultural rather than embracing the current cultural norms without careful examination before implementation; let's first ask. What does the Bible teach about this or that matter? Before we take a stand on any sociopolitical subject, regardless of how controversial it might be.

There is no doubt that Love helps us to be more empathetic and compassionate. When we love someone, we are more likely to put ourselves in their shoes and see things from their perspective. Love

can help us to be more understanding and patient with others, even when they make mistakes. For example, imagine a coworker who is going through a difficult time. If we approach them with Love and empathy, we may be able to provide the support they need to get through their struggles.

Let us turn to the Old Testament to deepen our understanding of Love. The Hebrew word for Love, "ahavah," encapsulates more than affection; it embodies steadfast commitment and loyalty. What is the significance of the Hebrew word for Love, "ahavah," about God's Love? This word echoes God's Love for us, which remains constant despite our shortcomings. As theologian, Walter Brueggemann writes, "Yahweh's love is not limited to moments of well-being but extends to embrace the turbulence of our lives."

## **Principle 2: Love in Action**

Love is not merely a concept – it demands action. In John 13:34-35, Jesus implores His disciples, "A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this, everyone will know that you are my disciples if you love one another." Notice Jesus' emphasis on the word "must." Love is not optional but mandatory for those who follow Him. Why?

Because Love helps us to build stronger connections with others, when we show Love to those around us, we create a sense of belonging and community. We could show God's Love as simple as reaching out to a friend to check in on them if you did not see them in church or at work or volunteering with an organization we care about. Through these acts of Love, we can deepen our relationships and create a more supportive and connected world.

Now, let us explore the Greek understanding of Love to truly grasp Love's practical application based on The New Testament's original language.

In the Greek language, multiple words are used to express different types or aspects of Love. Here are some of the different kinds of Love, along with their Greek translations and word-for-word definitions:

1. Agape (ἀγάπη): Unconditional Love
  - Agapaō (ἀγαπάω): To love, have affection for, be fond of, show goodwill
  - Agapētos (ἀγαπητός): Beloved, esteemed, highly regarded
  - Agapē (ἀγάπη): The Love of God, selfless Love, unconditional Love
2. Eros (ἔρως): Romantic Love, desire, passion
3. Storge (στοργή): Familial Love, natural affection, Love between family members, Love for one's child.
4. Fileo (φιλέω): Affectionate Love, To have affection for, love dearly, be a friend to
5. Xenia (ξενία): Hospitality Love and care for strangers, kindness to foreigners

Pastor, why do we need to know all these types of Love and how we apply them? First, as previously stated, society is trying to define what Love is for us, so first, I aim to point us to the Scriptures so we live lives led by the definitions offered by God rather than the world. Second, when people read John 21:15-17, they conclude that Jesus asked Peter if he loved him three times because Peter denied him three times, it might be, but it is deeper than that. Let's closer examine John 21:15-17

.<sup>15</sup>When they had finished eating, Jesus said to Simon Peter, "Simon, son of John, do you love me

more than these?"

"Yes, Lord," he said, "you know that I love you."

Jesus said, "Feed my lambs."

<sup>16</sup> Again Jesus said, "Simon son of John, do you love me?"

He answered, "Yes, Lord, you know that I love you."

Jesus said, "Take care of my sheep."

<sup>17</sup> The third time he said to him, "Simon son of John, do you love me?"

Peter was hurt because Jesus asked him the third time, "Do you love me?" He said, "Lord, you know all things; you know that I love you."

Jesus said, "Feed my sheep."

In John 21:15-17, Jesus asks Peter three times if he loves him. However, it is essential to note that Jesus and Peter use different words for Love in Greek.

In the original Greek text, Jesus uses "agapao" for Love. "Agapao" refers to selfless, unconditional, and sacrificial Love. It is often used to describe God's Love for humanity, and the Love believers are called to have for one another.

On the other hand, when Peter responds to Jesus, he uses the word "phileo" for Love. "Phileo" usually refers to a friendship or brotherly Love that carries a sense of affection or fondness. It is a more intimate and personal kind of Love.

This distinction in Greek is significant because it adds depth to the conversation between Jesus and Peter. Jesus asks Peter if he has agape love for him, representing the highest and most sacrificial form of Love. However, Peter responds by saying he has a phileo love for Jesus, suggesting a more familiar and affectionate love.

Upon Peter's response, Jesus adjusts his question the second and third time, using Peter's chosen word, "phileo," instead of "agapao." The second time Jesus asks emphasizes Jesus's meeting Peter where he is and accepting the Love Peter can offer.

Overall, the use of different types of Love by Jesus and Peter in Greek adds richness and complexity to their exchange, highlighting the depth and dynamics of their relationship. \_

These Greek words for Love express different dimensions and expressions of Love within human relationships and reflect the richness and depth of the concept of Love. The Greek word "agape" reflects a selfless love rooted in the will to seek the betterment of others. This Love is exemplified by Christ's sacrificial death on the Cross. Theologian Martin Luther King Jr. poignantly said, "We must develop and maintain the capacity to forgive. He who is devoid of the power to forgive is devoid of the power to love." Love in action calls us to forgive, serve, and extend grace toward one another.

### **Principle 3: Love is the Way of God**

Love is not merely a virtue we embrace; it is the very essence of God. In 1 John 4:8, the apostle John reminds us, "God is love." Love is inseparable from our understanding of the Divine. As we draw closer to God, His Love flows through us, transforming our lives and impacting those around us.

Love has the power to help us to live more fulfilling lives. When we love ourselves and others, we experience a sense of purpose and meaning that can't be found elsewhere. This can be seen in the small moments of Love we share with others, like holding hands with a loved one or sharing a laugh with a friend. By cultivating Love, we can find greater joy and fulfillment in all we do.

In the Old Testament, the prophet Micah passionately shares what the Lord requires of us: "To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God" (Micah 6:8). Love becomes the compass guiding us on this journey. Theologian and philosopher Soren Kierkegaard beautifully summed it up: "Love is the expression of the one who loves, not of the one who is loved. Those who think they can love only the people they prefer do not love at all. Love discovers truths about individuals that others cannot see." Love in the way of God transforms us, making us vessels of His grace.

### **Call to Action:**

Think about a time when you experienced or demonstrated Love in your own life. How did it make you feel? How did it impact those around you? By reflecting on these moments, we can see the power of Love firsthand and be inspired to spread more of this transformative emotion in our everyday lives.

On the other hand, I also want to invite you to think more profoundly about the implication of God's Love as defined in the Christian tradition. The Christian understanding of Love makes us unique compared to all major religions: Judaism, Hinduism, Islam, Buddhism, and the New Era. Some people seem to operate from the understanding that "all regions are the same." Nothing is further from the truth. All religions are, at best, similar on the surface but fundamentally different in their core. For example,

Christian theologians of all times identified three distinctive types of God's Love concerning salvation: Unconditional, Impartial, and Universal. God's Unconditional Love is characterized by unconditionally accepting all people, regardless of their faults or shortcomings. God's Love cannot be earned by human effort or merits. It's only by grace through faith. Most major religions are based on a merit system. God's Impartial Love is characterized by empathy and understanding, often leading to a desire to help and comfort all people, irrespective of who they are—God's Love equally to sinners and saints. Most major religions are based on a God who only loves the saints, not sinners. God's Universal Love is a type of Love that transcends the boundaries of individual relationships and is focused on general goodwill towards all nations. God's Universal Love is often described as a type of Love that is nonjudgmental and unconditional toward all nations. God is not only the world's Creator but also the world's Savior. In most significant religions, God saves only a particular group of people, and the rest of the world is subject to eternal damnation. All three distinctive types of Love are essential for us as saved children of the Loving God when we go out to testify to the broken world about Jesus and the nature of God we serve.

Now, let us explore five practical ways we can live out the grace of Love in our daily lives:

1. Cultivate an attitude of compassion and empathy, seeking to understand the struggles of others.
2. Practice forgiveness, liberating ourselves and others from the burdens of resentment.
3. Serve selflessly, reflecting the Love of Christ in tangible ways.
4. Speak words of encouragement, uplifting and enlightening those around us.
5. Embrace diversity, fostering unity amidst our differences, for God's Love transcends all boundaries.

Conclusion: As we conclude, let us remember that Love is the supreme embodiment of God's grace. It is the foundation upon which our faith rests. May we not merely be listeners of Love but doers as well. Let us embrace the divine invitation to love one another as Christ has loved us, thus becoming beacons of hope to a world in need.

**Prayer:** Let us go before the Lord in prayer

Loving God, we are grateful for the gift of Love that flows from You. Help us to experience and share

**Your Love in our lives.** Empower us to exhibit compassion, forgiveness, and grace toward others. May our actions reflect Your Love and draw others closer to You. In the Strong Name of Jesus, we pray. Amen.

**Benediction:** May the Love of God fill your hearts, infusing all your words and actions. Walk in the path of grace and Love, shining the light of Christ. Go forth, embodying His Love, as instruments of peace and reconciliation.