

This past week I was at the OSU hospital to visit Tom Smith, and as I drove to the parking garage I saw the trees were covered in red hearts. And I thought, "It's February." Then, on Thursday, Greg and I received our first Valentine which always arrives from our close friends in the alumni office at Miami University. Miami has this thing called, "Miami Mergers." When two people graduate from Miami and then marry, the couple are listed as "Miami Mergers." In a moment of marketing brilliance, someone started to send Valentines. I actually love Valentines Day. Growing up, my parents made this a big deal - giving my sister and me Valentines and candy. Candy was rare in our house, so the chocolate heart beside our pillow when we woke up in the morning was a treat. I love to make and send Valentines. I love to make heart-shaped sugar cookies. For me, Valentine's Day is about the deepest kind of love and I don't mean only love between two people in partnership and marriage. I mean the deepest kind of love - between all kinds of people and all kinds of relationships. For me, Valentine's Day celebrates God's love that can be expressed in many different ways.

Last fall when I was making a worship schedule for 2017, I decided to do something that I've long wanted to do - dedicate February to exploring and experiencing God's love. In other words, Lean in to Valentine's Day and hearts, to lean in to love. After all, love is the center of the Christian faith. When asked, what is the greatest commandment? God named Jesus didn't hesitate, didn't even need a moment to ponder or reflect. Immediately he said, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength. Love your neighbor as yourself." This is our memory verse for the month of February. It comes from the Old Testament - the book of Deuteronomy and is called the Shema. Shema is Hebrew for the word, "Hear..." This is how the greatest commandment begins - Hear O Israel, the Lord is your God, and you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, and strength."¹ Jesus added to this - he added the word "mind". You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength. Which is so important! Our minds are a gift from God. We are to love God with our mind - which is to love God by learning and thinking - by asking questions and examining all that is before us. Then Jesus combined the Love God with Love your neighbor as yourself. This is the verse that Jewish people hang by their doors - that that upon leaving or entering their homes, they remember as they go out and then as they return, they remember to Love God. We remember to love God with our whole selves. And to act from this love.

For three weeks, we are going to focus on this most important commandment. Today we focus on Love God. But to understand Love God, we first need to remember again what the meanings are for the word, Love. So this morning, our focus is on this word - Love. As Christians, as people seeking to follow God named Jesus, what is this Love? What does it look like, feel like? How do people express this God-centered love?

To understand the biblical meaning of Love, we need to remember some ancient Greek. The ancient Greeks did not have only one word for Love. Instead, they had no less than six words.² For example, there was Eros named after the Greek god of fertility. Eros was the word for passionate fiery sexual love - as in erotic. The Greeks were a little afraid of eros because it was described as an out-of-control feeling. Philius is the word for love among friends. Philadelphia - the city of brotherly love. Phil is deep abiding friendship with a loyalty like the kind shared between soldiers who serve in combat together. Phil is the love you have for a friend who knows you the best - the friend who would do anything for you and you know it and don't feel bad when you ask. Instead, when you need a philius friend the most, you feel grateful and understood and safe. (There is even a subset of philius that is the word used to describe friendship among family. I like this so much - because while we are loyal to our family, we may be friends, real friends with one sibling or a cousin - someone who is our family and who we also choose as

¹ Deuteronomy 6:4

²<http://www.yesmagazine.org/happiness/the-ancient-greeks-6-words-for-love-and-why-knowing-them-can-change-your-life>

a dear friend.) The Bible speaks of philius. When the Resurrected Christ asks Peter, "Do you love me?" Peter answers, "Yes, Lord, I philius you." Y best, my dearest, my most trusted friend.³

In the ancient Greek language, the words for Love go on and on. *Lupus* is playful and flirtatious. *Pragma* is longstanding - a mature love between people who have spent decades of their lives together because they have learned to compromise, tolerate, understand, accept. But the greatest love, according to the Greeks, the greatest, highest, most significant love was summoned up in the word, "agape." *Agape* is self-sacrificial. It is a selfless love and extends to all - family, friends, neighbors, strangers. In Latin, *agape* is translated into *caritas* or charity. Love that is given without any expectation of return. It is the most radical love because it gives without counting the cost. *Agape* is what the Buddhists call "universal loving kindness." it's what CS Lewis calls, "Gift-Love," because *agape* is always a pure gift - grace.⁴ *Agape* was rarely used by the Greeks - because who could embody this selfless giving? Until the New Testament, when *agape* is used 320 times.

In the epistle reading - epistle means letter - in the first letter of John - it says, "God is love." The real words are, "God is *agape*." God is self-giving, sacrificial, gift. God is unconditional. *Agape* - this is God's love for humanity and creation and it is throughout the New Testament. In John 13, when Jesus washes his disciples' feet, Jesus says, "Agape one another. This is how people will know you are my disciples, by your age for one another." In John 15 Jesus says, "There is no greater *agape* than to lay down your life for your friend." And in the most quoted, most famous scripture on love, Paul writes in the first letter to the church in Corinth, "I will show you a more excellent way... *Agape* is patient. *Agape* is kind. Faith, hope, and *agape* abide, these three, and the greatest of these is *agape*."

Notice what *agape* is not. God's love is not a transaction. You do not have to do anything to receive this essential love. God's love is here - all around us - God's love is here - within us. To love and be loved, we have to get in touch with God's *agape* and stay in touch with God's *agape*. This doesn't come naturally to most people - connecting with God's *agape* is something we have to learn to feel, and then have to practice. I love the story about the man in New York City who asked a person on the street, "How do you get to Carneige Hall from here?" and the person answered, "Practice, practice, practice." How do we learn to feel God's love for ourselves and live from God's love? In John's letter he writes, "No one has ever seen God. If we *agape* one another, God lives in us, and God's *agape* is perfected in us." Loving one another as a real and tangible way to love God and be loved by God. Next week, we'll focus on "Love your neighbor."

³ John 21

⁴ CS Lewis, [The Four Loves](#)