

“Genuine Love” – Pr Jim Sprengle – Lent 4 – March 9, 2024

- I. **John 3:16** – ¹⁶ “For God so loved the world, that He gave His only Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life.”
- II. **We can describe love in many different ways.**
 - a. We might really enjoy people, places, or things – like Damien Lillard, or the beach, or coffee – and say we “love” them...
 - b. We might have a deep affection, or care deeply about another person.
 - i. We might love someone romantically.
 - ii. We may love someone in our family... or a good friend.
 - iii. Perhaps we love the members of our church.
 - iv. We might even love strangers, as God says to “love your neighbor.”
 - c. It seems that there are different types of love, depending on a couple of different things:
 - i. One is the source of the love we feel...
 - ii. Another is who receives it...
 - d. The source of our love might be purely selfish –
 - i. Sometimes people feel love only when their needs are being met and will reject others for not meeting their needs.
 1. Unfortunately, many marriages are based on this selfish love that expects the other person to make them happy and fulfill them, or they stop loving them.
 2. When the source of love is our needs or selfish motives, it doesn’t last long.
 - ii. When the source of our love is based on Christ and the good of others, then it can last indefinitely.
 1. In many ways, the love that flows out of Christ is sacrificial in nature, which means we don’t expect anything in return.
 2. Throughout Scripture, God’s love for us is described as a “steadfast love” – one that endures...
 3. Through our relationship with Jesus, we are able to love in a way that is sacrificial, steadfast, and based on Christ.
 - e. The other part of the love equation is who receives our love.
 - i. Who is our love meant for?
 - ii. Love can be given between couples, between family members, to members of our church body, and to any stranger.
 1. Again, as we love family, this is understandable because of our long relationship – but even Jesus says, “For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have?” (Matthew 5:46)
 - iii. Yet, when we aim our love toward a stranger, or even someone we don’t know well... is it really love?
 1. If we don’t feel all happy and affectionate toward them, is it love?

2. If love isn't always a deep emotion, then what is it?
- f. Love is action.
 - i. I've said this many times before, but love is a verb.
 - ii. It's nearly impossible to define love or describe what it means other than it's just a deep affection for someone or something.
 1. If I ask you to define love, and then tell me how you know that you love someone... it's impossible without describing what you do.
 - iii. It means very little if we say we love someone, but never do anything for them.

III. **Our Gospel reading is a reminder of what genuine love is.**

- a. Martin Luther referred to John 3:16 as the heart of the Bible, or the Gospel in miniature... because it sums up God's love for us.
- b. If we could start at the beginning of the chapter, Nicodemus, the Pharisee or religious leader, came to Jesus at night and has a discussion with Him.
 - i. Jesus says that a person must have new life given to them by the Holy Spirit and water (or baptism) in order to enter God's kingdom. (John 3:5)
 - ii. He then goes on to say that we cannot get these things by going up to heaven and getting them ourselves... or through our own work, but only by the one who brings them to us from heaven – Jesus! (John 3:13)
- c. Then going back to the Israelites wandering in the desert, Jesus connects the raising up of the bronze serpent to His crucifixion and being raised up on a cross.
 - i. The people who needed to look at the bronze serpent were judged and condemned by their sins, but they believed God's promise of healing... they raised their eyes in faith to be healed.
 - ii. The people who need to look upon Jesus are judged and condemned as well, but the promise is new life and forgiveness for all who look upon Him and believe that His suffering and death was for them.
 1. Out of that gift of being tortured and nailed to a cross – only to be raised up for all to see – we may look upon Jesus in faith and have healing... a new life... a rebirth.
- d. Jesus then explains, "For God loved the world like this: He gave His one and only Son, so that everyone who believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life." (vs 16)
 - i. We often say that verse with, "God loved the world soooooo much," but it's probably more, "God loved the world like so... or like this."
 - ii. As we reflect back on Abraham being told to sacrifice his only son Isaac, God was merciful and provided a ram to take Isaac's place.
 1. God's own Son was the only sacrifice that could be enough, and there was no one else to take His place on the cross.

- iii. So, our Father in heaven gave up His only Son Jesus like this – allowing His innocent and perfect Son to be executed... so that whoever looks upon Him (or believes in Him) should never die, but instead has new life with God from that moment on and forever.
 - e. The perfect Son of God willingly died for our sins so that we would not be separated from God in our sins forever.
 - i. That is love in action, that is love at work.
 - ii. I know that Jesus loves me because He literally died for me.
 - 1. I am unworthy and sinful, but He loves me like this: He opened His arms on the cross and received my punishment...my death.
 - 2. That is genuine love.
 - f. Please don't overlook that it's not just a personal thing for me... it's all of you as well... Jesus died for each of us, out of pure and genuine love.
 - g. I'm not sure if you are like me or not... but I regularly sit in awe of our God when I think about His love for me... and all people.
 - i. It takes me go back to our opening hymn as the hymn writer ponders the mystery of God's love us.
 - 1. When I behold Jesus Christ, True God who died for me, I wonder much at His love, As He hung on the tree....What kind of love is this? What kind of love is this? You showed Your love, Jesus, there to me on Calvary.
 - 2. Yes, Jesus certainly showed His love for us... because that's what genuine love does.

IV. **Now, if you think you deserve God's love, you are wrong.**

- a. Let's be honest—most of the time, we aren't very lovable.
- b. We are rebellious children who don't love God and love others like we do ourselves... but usually we choose how to love and who to love.
 - i. Yet even in our sin, God's steadfast love comes to us, and He continues to love us unconditionally, even without deserving it.
- c. The problem with selfish love is that it's the opposite of steadfast.
 - i. One minute I love with you, and the next I can't stand you because I'm angry with you.
 - ii. Jesus shows us what love is, and we can love like that too... forgetting about ourselves, our desires and feelings... and the way the world wants us to love...
 - iii. If we simply look to Jesus, we will know what genuine love is.
- d. Take this with you as you go from here: Jesus put His genuine love into action for you by dying on the cross for your sins.
 - i. No, we can't offer Him anything in return, but that's the point, we owe it all to Him... and nothing could ever pay back the price of His death and resurrection to forgive us.
- e. By the grace of God, the source of our love is Jesus Christ Himself, and that means our love is not only genuine, but active. Amen.