

February 18, 2007

The second of four sermons on the Greek words for love

Love's Language:
Storge: Family Ties that Bind
Ephesians 5:21-6:4 (*The Message*)

Three weeks ago, I made a statement in the sermon that love is the most important word, as well as the most important idea, in the Bible. I'll go even further out on this dogmatic limb: Love is the most powerful force in human relations, greater than fear, guilt, grief, or any other dynamic involving relationships between people.

Of course, not everyone offers agreement around this thesis. Two weeks ago, I met a group of pastoral colleagues around the lunch table at an Italian restaurant in Charlotte. Perhaps you are familiar with this chain of Italian eateries for each of the restaurants is decorated to the hilt with Italian motif. Even a visit to the restroom will subject a patron to a brief lesson in Italian. As I looked over the menu, I spied a quote that captured my attention even more than the menu of food. The quote appeared in Italian and then in English, perhaps the latter for those who had not made sufficient visits the restroom. The quote read: *There is no love more sincere than the love of food.*

I made note of the quote and later discovered that George Bernard Shaw is credited with the line, and I think like many of his quips, this quote was vintage

Shaw sarcasm. Baptists, however, may disagree, especially those of us who enjoy calling ourselves “the church of the covered dish.” And, bear in mind that a healthy group of Baptist pastors were perusing the menus.

I still say that love is the important idea in the Bible, as well as the most powerful force in human relations.

- The most familiar verse in the Bible affirms this dynamic force saying *For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son and whoever believes in him will not perish but have everlasting life.* (Jn. 3:16)
- That same gospel writer declared very simply in his smaller letters: *Let us love one another; for love is of God, and the one who loves is born of God and knows God. The one who does not love does not know God; for God is love.* (1 John 4:7,8)
- Confused by the maze of his day, a person asked Jesus what was the most important expectation from God. Do you remember how Jesus responded? He said that it is all about love. To love God with one’s whole being—heart, soul, mind, and strength—is the first and greatest commandment, and to love one’s neighbor as one loved him or herself is the companion to that expectation.

Because love is so splendid—so powerful as we open our lives to love’s relationships and will ourselves to respond in kind—the New Testament engages no less than four distinct words in order to communicate the different facets of love. Do you remember the four Greek words for love?

- First, there is *agape*, the loftiest of the four loves. The kind of love that motivated God to create the world, and the kind of love that God expects of you and me for one another.
- Then there is *philos*—the love of friendship. As you well know, Philadelphia literally means “the love of brothers.”
- Last week, the Lord’s Day before Valentine’s Day, we considered *eros*—the romantic, sexual love between two people.

Today, I invite you to consider *storge*—the word in the Greek language that describes the love of family members for one another, particularly the love of parents for children, usually interpreted as “affection”.

The only place where *storge* appears in the NT is in one of the postscripts of Paul’s letter to the Romans. In Romans 12, Paul makes a last appeal for Christ followers in Rome to live lives motivated by sincere joyful love. In verse 10, he joins two of the words for love—*philos* and *storge*—saying, “Love one another with brotherly affection.”

Although the word *storge* appears only once in the NT, the dynamic idea of loving affection within the family saturates the Bible, in fact one could very well say that the story of God’s love and redemption comes through the conduit of marriage and family—Adam and Eve, Abraham and Sarah, Jacob and Rachel, David and Bathsheba, Joseph and Mary. In most cases, those families were dysfunctional, which gives hope to all of us because there is no perfect family.

C.S. Lewis said that among the four distinct loves humans and animals share the greater similarity in the affection between parents and offspring. A cat washing her kittens or a litter of puppies scrambling over their mother communicates a commitment of love and affection. And if you are hiking in the Smoky Mountains, do not come between a bear and her cub.

Perhaps a Broadway play may communicate the essence of *storge*. Many of us are familiar with the story line of *Fanny*, the story of a young woman in love with a man. When she tells him that she is pregnant with his baby he responds by taking a job on a ship and going to sea. Meanwhile, another man waited in the wings and reveals his love to Fanny. They commit themselves to one another in marriage. When the child is born the son is given his name. Later the sailor comes back to port and discovers what has happened. Angrily, he demands his son. Discussing the situation with his uncle, he states his case for custody, saying, “Tell me, uncle, who is the real father? The one who gave the baby life or the one who buys the bibs?”

The uncle replies, “The father is the one who loves.”

Our NT lesson resonates with *storge*'s heartbeat. In order to fully appreciate the Bible's teaching that a family is distinguished by its love and affection for one another, we need to consider the milieu of this Biblical teaching. In the 1st Century women and children were viewed more as possessions than people. Women had virtually no rights over their husbands. They could be thrown out of the marriage and home with no recourse in the courts. Parents even

had the power of life and death over children. The words of Jesus, as well as the practice of the early church, were radical teachings for marriage and family.

Little wonder that the early church declared true and undefiled religion as a love that reached out to women and children left to fend for themselves.

Family affection may be lived out in a myriad of ways, limited only by a family's creativity. However, two goals are inherent in *storge*. The first is independence. It is the goal of parents to move their children toward independence. Just as a cat weans her kittens and a bear teaches a cub to survive in the Smoky Mountains, parents nurture their children toward a life of responsibility. In many cases, as some of us know, children reenter the picture as caregivers of aging parents.

The second goal inherent in a Christian application of *storge* teaches followers of Christ to demonstrate family love and affection toward those who are different from us. Several ministries are experiencing passion and growth in our congregation; the motivation may be the application of family affection. For the fourth consecutive year, some in our fellowship will travel to Kiev in order to work toward a safe, formative village for homeless children. In a way you are living out the affection of parents for children.

Others in our fellowship have found a place of meaningful service on Wednesday evening as you work with boys and girls in music and missions. Some of those boys and girls come from poor, single parent homes.

Still others in our fellowship are planning to return to the Gulf in order to help rebuild homes devastated by Hurricane Katrina. *Storge* drives you to believe that everyone needs the love of family, as well as a place where families may reside in safety.

One last story about a man who lived out the love of family for others. The name Shelby Horton will probably not ring a bell in your mind, unless some of the Wingate Lions' Club recognize that name as a regional and national leader among Lions. At nearly ninety years of age, Shelby died this past week and was memorialized in Asheville on Thursday. As a friend and former pastor of the longtime lawyer, I recalled some of the ways that good man lived out family affection. He and his wife, Audrey, did not have children of their own, but they did become parents of two daughters through adoption.

Perhaps the most inspiring story that demonstrated a life of caring and sharing was an incident that occurred early in his law career when he sat as judge on the Juvenile Bench. An older adolescent stood before Judge Horton guilty of crimes of theft. Many described the adolescent as a lost child with little hope for rehabilitation. Shelby went out on a limb. He asked the young fellow if he would be willing to submit to a creative plan to stay out of juvenile incarceration. In short, Shelby Horton bought that young fellow a lawnmower and helped him to secure mowing contracts in his Asheville neighborhood. I think that Shelby Horton saved that young man's life.

The word is *storge*—the family tie that binds. May you know the devoted affection of a family that loves you, and in gratitude to God, pay it forward. Amen.