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The first of four sermons on the Greek words for love

**Love's Language:**  
***Eros: Sensual or Spiritual?***  
Genesis 2:18-25

Two 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.

- 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.

Since I made the statement two weeks ago that love is the most important idea in the Bible, I have been thinking that the statement deserves a bit more attention, perhaps a great deal more attention. Today, I begin a four week series of sermons about the Bible's emphasis on love.

As Nat King Cole's hit indicated, love is indeed a many splendored thing, in fact love is so splendid that the language of the New Testament engages no less than four words to describe the different facets of love. Three of those words have been imported into the English language. Do you know those words? One of the C.S. Lewis' most popular books – The Four Loves—deals with the four facets of 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 *philon*—the love of friendship. As you well know, Philadelphia literally means “the love of brothers.”
- The Greek word that has not yet found its way into the English language—*storge*—describes the love of family for one another.
- Can you recall the other word for love that has been imported from Greek into English? To give you a hint, this is the weekend before Valentine's Day, February 14. *Eros*—from which we get the description *erotic*—denotes the romantic, sexual love between two people.

Some remember the Victorian Age as claiming two subjects as being off limits for civilized conversation—death and sex. As you well know, if the Victorians were restrained on conversational matters regarding death and sex, present society no longer harbors any constraint with those subjects—except perhaps the church. The Christian church as a whole continues to avoid a healthy dialogue about human sexuality, especially erotic love, even though the Bible is far from being quiet about the subject.

As we endeavor to speak about sexuality, what to say and how much to say is perhaps the biggest issues of concern. Twenty-five years ago, James Dobson told an imaginary story about a young boy who came home from school and asked his parents, “What is sex?” With sweaty palms and shaky voice his father sat him down and for forty five minutes gave him the talk about the birds and bees. Finally the Dad asked, “Now, son do you have any questions?”

“Yes, Dad, how do I get all of that stuff into that little box that says ‘Sex—M or F?’”

Hopefully, as we endeavor to talk about sex, we will disagree with one on how to approach the issue, not on whether we should broach the matter in the context of faith and religious instruction, besides, what better place to engage in conversation about one of the most important life topics than church? To abdicate the subject of sexual conversation away from home, church, even school is to leave our children, youth, even adults as easy prey to distorted sexual views. If you don’t believe it, just browse through any popular magazine and peruse the

advertisements or engage a Google search on the topic *eros* and see what you land. But, be careful.

The Bible is not quiet about sex. Even though the word *eros* does not appear in the Greek versions of the Bible, the idea of sexual love between a man and woman is a prominent theme throughout the Bible. The word of God basically says two things about *eros* or sexual love—two sides of the same coin. First, the Bible gives a grave warning about erotic feelings and actions that have no restraint or boundaries. Second, the word of God presents *eros* or sexual, romantic love as one of the most lovely, intimate gifts to humanity.

It seems that the church has been obsessed with one side of the coin to the exclusion and detriment of the other. The world too often views the church and its clergy in caricature—an exaggerated cartoon, if you will imagine. Most television programs and cinema cast clergy characters as sexual perverts, money grubbers, or buffoons.

Perhaps that caricature is right regarding the church's level of volume about sexuality. We have the volume turned up on the prohibition, but the sound is hardly audible regarding a sound, Biblical theology of sexuality.

Perhaps it is easier to be against something than taking a positive stand for something. And I know well that the Bible gives a grave warning about erotic feelings and actions that have no restraint or boundaries:

- The seventh commandment posts a No Trespassing sign in the matter of adultery.

- Biblical narratives about Sodom and Gomorrah and the sordid stories like David and Bathsheba's deadly tryst embarrass and frighten us about the dead end road that any of us could take toward the sexual abuse of one another.
- New Testament warnings are plain about healthy erotic feelings reduced to lust and conquest.

But the Bible is more than a book of warnings and No Trespassing signs. The word of God presents human sexuality and erotic love as one of the greatest gifts to humanity.

This morning we have heard one of the beautiful stories of creation in Genesis 1 and 2. Throughout the first creation story the Lord God appears to be engaged in creative play calling into creation the heavens and the earth. Day after day, the Lord God plays at creation causing plants to grow and all sorts of animals to multiply across the planet—birds of the air, fish in the sea, all sorts of creatures upon the ground. After each day, the Lord steps back celebrates creation with the statement “This is good.”

Then the Lord God creates humanity—*adam*—and places him in the garden of creation to continue the creative art. For the first time in the creative narrative we hear the Lord God say that something is not good. What is not good? It is not good that the man should be alone, so the Lord decided to make a helper, a companion, a mate for the soul. And the Bible says that the man and his wife were both naked, and were not ashamed. (Gen. 2:25)

Throughout the Bible we hear about the beauty and mystery of God's human creation of erotic love.

*Three things are too wonderful for me; four I do not understand;  
The way of an eagle in the sky,  
The way of a serpent on a rock,  
The way of a ship on the high seas,  
And the way of a man with a maiden. (Proverbs 30:18)*

I don't know that I have heard any sermons, even teaching sessions from the Song of Solomon. The book is made up of twenty-five poems about human love and courtship filled with erotic images. Reading from a modern translation will make one blush, but hopefully smile and celebrate the mystery and beauty of erotic love.

I proposed a question as the topic for this sermon—*Eros: Sensual or Spiritual?* What do you think? Is the erotic love between a man and woman purely sensual, an attraction that begins with that inexplicable attraction between two people that has too many similarities with a case of the flu? Even after a couple experiences sexual intercourse, does erotic love remain a purely sensual experience?

The Bible says that *eros* is both, sensual and spiritual, especially the latter. Two people, perhaps first attracted by the's sexual otherness, begin to see one another through the eyes of longing and release, but gradually a couple do just that—couple in physical, emotional, and spiritual connections.

Take Jim and Louise, a humble couple who have been married for forty years. For the last five years, Jim has given his wife perpetual care as Louise has

suffered from a debilitating illness. One person asked Jim what motivated him to give such careful, loving attention. Jim said to the inquirer, “Forty years ago, I stood before people and said ‘I do.’ One day I hope to stand before God and say, ‘I did.’”

Eros is both—sensual and spiritual. As the wonderful creative myth about Adam and Eve proclaims, may we too gladly exclaim “Thanks be to God.”

In his book Thank God for Sex (A Christian Model for Sexual Understanding and Behavior) Harry Hollis has a beautiful prayer poem that may express many of our sentiments. Perhaps it is an appropriate closure for this sermon, as well as a call for our congregation to be more deliberate in a theology of sexuality.

I know what sex is—  
 It is body and spirit,  
 It is passion and tenderness,  
 It is strong embrace and gentle hand-holding,  
 It is open nakedness and hidden mystery,  
 It is joyful tears on honeymoon faces, and  
 It is tears on wrinkled faces at a golden wedding anniversary.

Sex is a quiet look across the room,  
 a love note on a pillow,  
 a rose laid on a breakfast plate,  
 laughter in the night.

Sex is life—not all of life—  
 but wrapped up in the meaning of life.

Sex is your gift, O God,  
 to enrich life,  
 to continue the race,  
 to communicate,  
 to show me who I am,

to reveal my mate,  
to cleanse through “one flesh.”

Lord, some people say sex and religion don't mix;  
But your word says sex is good.  
Help me to keep it good in my life.  
Help me to be open about sex  
    And still protect its mystery.  
Help me to see that sex is neither demon nor deity.  
Help me not to climb into a fantasy world of imaginary partners;  
Keep me in the real world to love the people you have created.

Thank you, Lord, for making me a sexual being.  
Thank you for showing me how to treat others with trust and love.  
Thank you letting me talk to you about sex.  
Thank you that I feel free to say:  
    “Thank God for sex!”