**Why.**

**Exploring the Answer to Everyone’s Question**

Message 1 – “Why Love”

St. Paul’s United Methodist Church of Elizabethtown

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Good morning, good afternoon, and good evening! Welcome to Sermon Time. I am one of your hosts, Dave Grey. We are so glad you have chosen to worship with us here at St. Paul’s Church Online. This is an exciting time as we kick off a brand-new series called **Why**. Will you pray with me?

*Opening Prayer*

Father, even though we are worshipping separately, the one thing that

binds us together is You. I ask, please send the Holy Spirit to open our hearts and our minds to the message You have for us this morning. Amen.

The word why can be used to form a question. For example, most of us have probably asked over the past few weeks,

“Why is the coronavirus happening?”

“Why did people decide to hoard toilet paper?”

“Why can’t school be year-round?”

The other way to use the word why is as part of an explanation. As in, “this is the reason why….” We are going to focus on this use of the word why.

We live in a disorienting time. In my opinion, it seems like we are walking in a vast desert. No matter where you turn, it is not quite clear what direction you are facing. Everything looks the same. The days and hours run together. It is easy to become discouraged and start to lose hope. We are all living in a different looking world.

But do not lose hope. We are not walking through this desert alone. The goal of this series is to remind you that we can take comfort in the one constant in our lives, Jesus Christ. Over the next few weeks, Pastor Matt and I will be looking back and renewing our understanding of what it means to be a Christ-Follower. Our hope is that by looking back, we can walk forward together confidently and proclaim proudly to a hurting word the good news of the never-ending love of Christ.

So, back to the word **why**. Each week we will focus on an aspect of what it means to be a Christ-Follower. This week we look at why we love.

Before I dive in, I want to take a moment and acknowledge that some of you watching may not be a Christ-Follower or you lost your way and feel you are too far gone to get back. First, I am glad you are here with us and I am praying for you. Second, you might think this message does not apply to you and you may be right. However, I invite you to open your heart and mind to the message and listen to what the Holy Spirit is whispering to you. I hope that by outlining why, you begin to question and we, as a church welcome you to grow deeper with us.

So, why do Christ-Followers love? What does it mean to act in Christian love? First, it is important to understand what kind of love we are talking about. C.S. Lewis wrote a book called, The Four Loves. He defined love in four ways. First, is the Greek word, *storge* (stor-jay) “love”. This is defined as the love between a parent and a child.

The second type of love is *phileo* (phil-lay-o). This is where we get the name Philadelphia. It means the love of a friend. In John 21, when Jesus is asking Peter if he loves him, the third time he repeats the question, Jesus refers to this kind of love.

The third type of love is *eros*. Lewis describes this as the sense of “being in love” or “loving” someone. It is the romantic love.

The final and fourth type is the Greek word, *agapao* (a-ga-pay-o). This is defined by Lewis as love that exists regardless of changing circumstances. He also sees this as selfless love and recognizes it as the greatest of the four loves. This is the love we will be focusing on during this time together.

I am not quite sure when I first heard it, but sometime during this time of being physically distant there was a song called “*Ubi Cartias*”, which is Latin for ‘Where Charity Is’. The first line of the hymn is “*Ubi caritas et amor, Deus ibi est”*. Which when translated from Latin to English, is:

**Where charity and love are, there God is.**

I think that is beautiful. When we act in love and charity, God is there.

But why do we love? What compels us as Christ-Followers to act in love and what does that mean? The main text we will be focusing is **John 3:16-20**. I will be reading from the English Standard Version:

*For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal live. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God. And this is the judgment: the light has come into the world, and people loved the darkness rather than the light because their works were evil. For everyone who does wicked things hates the light and does not come to the light, lest his works should be exposed.*

This passage has been called the “gospel in a nutshell.” This morning I want to focus on the first three words of the passage, “*For God so loved…*” Using Lewis’s examples of the four types, what type of love do you think is being recorded by John? We can eliminate *eros*, as this deals with romance.

What about *phileo*? Friends can be as close as family. Yet would you be willing to sacrifice your child to save them? I think we can eliminate *phileo* as well.

*Storge* (stor-jay) love is described as the love between a parent and child. So, it could make sense; however, Jesus is the Son of God. As a parent, would you be willing to sacrifice your child so others could live?

This leaves us with one option left. *Agapao* (a-ga-pay-o), the selfless love of God, is the correct description of the love shown by God in John 3:16.

We did not earn this love, nor do we deserve it. We deserve death. We are natural born sinners. Yet, God did not abandon us. He did not leave us. He sent His only Son to die and redeem us.

But why do we love? As Christ-Followers, what compels us to love? To find the answer, we must walk a little deeper into the New Testament.

A few chapters later in the Gospel of John [John 13], John starts recording the events of the Last Supper. A few verses after he washes the feet of his apostles, Jesus becomes troubled and tells the apostles, one of them is going to betray him.

Think about that for a minute. Would you be willing to take on the posture of a servant, washing the feet of your closest friends, with the knowledge one of them had betrayed you and as a result, you would die?

But Jesus is perfect. He knew what Judas was going to do, yet He washed his feet anyway. Jesus displayed *agapao* love in this moment. Remember, Lewis’s definition, “a love that exists despite changing circumstances.” Further on Jesus states a new commandment in **John 13:34**, *“love one another: just as I have loved you…By this all people will know that you are my disciples…”*

For those of you who are reading that call yourselves Christians or Christ-Followers, do you always act in love? What if the circumstances change? I know I struggle with putting conditions on who I love and how much. We all do. We all suffer, to borrow a word from Pastor David, “maskism.” We all make snap judgments about someone based on what they look like, what they are doing, or what they are wearing. Yet, if we call ourselves Christians or Christ-Followers, then we need to walk and act in a manner reflective of the example of Christ. We need to understand that when we interact with others, we are not just interacting with another human being. In his book, Irresistible, Andy Stanley, quotes a passage by C.S. Lewis. He writes:

There are no ordinary people. You have never talked to a mere mortal. Nations, cultures, arts, civilizations—these are mortal. And their life is to ours as the life of a gnat. But it is immortals who we joke with, work with, marry, snub, and exploit…Next to the blessed sacrament itself, your neighbor is the holiest object presented to your sense.

We believe everyone was created by God. Therefore, this entitles them to the same grace and mercy as us. Full stop. It is on us to show them, *agapao* love, the love of God. To put this in Biblical perspective, the Apostle John writes in **1 John 4:20-21,**

*If anyone says, “I love God,” and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he*

*who does not love his brother whom he has seen cannot love God whom we has not seen. And this commandment we have from him: whoever loves God must also love his brother.*

Over the past few weeks and even more recently, we have seen what happens when hate and fear take hold of our society. The deaths of Ahmaud Arbery, Breona Taylor, and George Floyd have highlighted the deep schism of racial inequality that exists in America. As Christians, our identity is in the love of Christ. When hate for our brothers and sisters fills our hearts, we dishonor God and what He did on our behalf. As Christians, we must ensure those on the margins of our society are no longer marginalized, are given a voice to be heard, and an ear to hear their concerns. We must answer acts of hate with acts of love. It is through acts of love the Christian Church has been sustained.

Andy Stanley in Irresistible highlights the work of early Christians as propelling Christianity out of the middle East and sustaining it through the centuries. During the time of these Christians, infanticide was legal in the Roman Empire. Babies were abandoned in the wild for various reasons such as birth defects, suspicion of infidelity, economics, and gender.

Yet early Christians did not sit back. They visited sites where babies were usually abandoned and took them into their homes and raised them as their own. Here is what Stanley writes:

Rescuing abandoned babies isn’t commanded or even commended in the New Testament. Food was scarce and expensive. Homes were small. Babies died all the time. Why would anyone put their own family in jeopardy on behalf of an abandoned child?

Christian Scriptures did not require it.

Jewish Scriptures did not require it.

First-century Jesus followers were convinced love required it.

Through their example of sacrificial love, Christians were able to change their world. In 318 ADS, the Emperor Constantine declared infanticide a crime and then in 374 AD, the Emperor Valentinian made exposure a capital offense.

God was with the early Christians and shone through their acts of love and charity. What about now? What about the time we are living in now?

I believe we are living in a moment of revival of the Christian Church in the United States. It may not seem like it and I understand the data reflecting the trends about the broader church in the United States show the numbers of decline continue. But God is not confined by data or trends.

Through our acts of love and charity, the love of God is amplified, and the church grows stronger. In our community and beyond, St. Paul’s must become a refuge of love. We must open our doors to everyone and walk with them regardless of their circumstances. This is living out the example of Christ. I am reading a book called Gentle and Lowly: The Heart of Christ for Sinners and Sufferers, by Dane Ortlund. One of the passages from the book says the following:

Only as we drink down the kindness of the heart of Christ will we leave in our wake, everywhere we go, the aroma of heaven, and die one day having startled the world with glimpses of a divine kindness too great to be boxed in by what we deserve.

This morning’s message was to provide an explanation for why Christians love. To summarize, we love because God loved us first. He loved us so much, He was willing to sacrifice His Son for us, his creation, so we may have eternal life with Him in His Kingdom. Because of our commitment to follow the teachings of Christ, we are commanded to love others because this is how the world knows us as the disciples of Christ. However, we must understand, the more we show the love of God, the more the world will show us hate. We must not lose heart but continue to press forward. We must extend an open hand to the world, rather than a clenched fist. We must be willing to take up our crosses daily. The future of the Church starts today. It starts with me and you.

So, what can we do as we remain physically distant? If you use social media, be aware of what you are posting or re-posting. We are representatives of Christ all the time, not just some of the time. Reach out and check-in on neighbors (as you are able). Educate yourself and understand all perspectives of the issues, even if you don’t agree with them.

As we move forward and return to being physically close, and you come to a situation that you are not sure of what to do or what to say, ask yourself a simple question, “What does love require of me?” To take it one step further, “what does *agapao* love, require of me?

If we do not embrace this attitude now and carry it out, then I have a new question for you. Who will?

*Ending Prayer*

Father, there is so much hurting in our world today. You are the Great Comforter and are Sovereign over everything. Use us, Your Church, to provide love and comfort to those who are hurting. Act through us to bring glory to Your Kingdom. Restore us with the courage and strength to out-love the world every day. In Your Son’s Name, Amen.