

HEARTLESS

Becoming More Affectionate People

4Love Series (Part 1) | Texts: 2 Tim 3:1-5; Rom 1:29-31

Some years ago, I was treated to a tour of a spectacular equestrian estate in the hills of Southern California. The stables alone were an architectural masterpiece and cleaner than most homes. There were trails winding through groves of eucalyptus tree and fountains and waterfalls to delight the eye. At the center of the estate was a massive home built to suit every wish of the retired chairman of a well-known department store chain. He was my host that day and two things impressed me as we wandered about: First, how strikingly wealthy he was. And, secondly, how stunningly empty he was.

Alan's wife had died. His kids no longer talked to him. He could not identify for me anyone he considered an enduring friend. There was no cause or charity he was living for, save for the upkeep of this monumental property. There was a hardness in his face and a sadness in his eyes. I understood now why, when Alan first wandered into my church office one day, my administrative assistant mistook him for a homeless man. But homelessness – at least in the literal sense -- was clearly not Alan's issue. His problem was HEARTLESSNESS. No amount of money could make up for the deficit of love.

Love is Not God

If it were not FOR LOVE, your life and mine would be impoverished too. You can have all the health and material comforts in the world but, if not FOR LOVE, your life will be a hollow one. You'll keep stuffing things and experiences into that heart-shaped hole, wondering why you aren't fulfilled. Similarly, you can be prominent and powerful but, if you die without becoming someone of great LOVE, you'll have missed out on the greatest kind of influence possible. You may live on in the history books but not in anyone's heart. In the end, **"Faith, hope, and love abide, these three; but the greatest of these is LOVE"** (1 Cor 13:13).

The primary importance and enduring greatness of love derives from the fact that **"God is love"** (1 John 4:8). Let me underline what I am and am NOT saying there. GOD is love; but LOVE isn't God. As important as love is, having love in my life isn't a substitute for having God at the center and on the throne of my life. Some of the greatest problems humanity has brought upon itself came from elevating our love of self, or family, or tribe, or country, or even our religion (by that I mean football, of course) to the place God should occupy. As C.S. Lewis observes, "when love become a god," it's only a matter of time before "it becomes a demon." How many times in history has human devotion or passion become untethered from the true God's guidance and wrought terrible damage, as U2 sings, "in the name of love?"

Love isn't God and it can't replace God at the center of our life. But love IS God's preeminent character trait and major motive for moving in the ways that he does. It therefore follows that if God is at the center of our life, OUR preeminent character trait and major motive for doing as we do will be what? That's right: LOVE. The evidence of our relationship with God and of our maturity as followers of Jesus will be that we live and move and have our being in and FOR LOVE.

Love is a Many Splendored Thing

This is what the Bible teaches us again and again. **Whoever lives in love lives in God, and God in them"** (1 John 4:16). **Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love"** (1 John 4:8). Jesus says that the greatest commandment is to: **"LOVE God... and LOVE your neighbor"** (Luke 10:27). The Apostle Paul says that love is the most excellent GIFT (1 Cor 12:31ff) and the first FRUIT (Gal 5:22) of someone truly open to the influence of God's Holy Spirit.

A great preacher of an earlier generation once said that understanding love is the key to understanding all of the other fruit of the Spirit God wants to grow up in your life and mine, because: Joy is love singing. Peace is love resting. Patience is love enduring. Kindness is love's touch. Generosity is love's character. Faithfulness is love's habit. Gentleness is love's self-forgetfulness. And self-control is love holding the reins. (Donald Grey Barnhouse)

So here's the big question for today: If love is so important... if it is the key to the life that is truly abundant and good... if it is the difference between winding up in a condition like Alan or winding up like Jesus instead... then: What is LOVE and how do I live my life for God with it? Oh, I'm so glad you asked, because that's the question that is going to drive our exploration through this whole month ahead.

As another old song lyric puts it: "Love is a many-splendored thing." By that, I mean that love has many dimensions to it. In fact, classically speaking, there are at least FOUR KINDS OF LOVE for which the ancient Greeks had four different words. Today, I want to introduce you to just the first of those words because it is foundational to understanding all the others. Will you go with me?

Many centuries ago, the Apostle Paul looked out a world that seemed to be in such terrible moral, spiritual, and social crisis that he was convinced that he must be living in the last days of human history. I know that many of you look out at our times and wonder the same thing too. Listen to how Paul described these conditions, first in one of his letters to his protégé, a young pastor named Timothy: **"Mark this: There will be terrible times in the last days. People will be lovers of themselves, lovers of money, boastful, proud, abusive, disobedient to their parents, ungrateful,**

unholy, WITHOUT LOVE..." (2 Tim 3:1-5). Pay particular attention to that phrase "without love."

At another point, Paul writes a letter to the Christians at Rome, sharing similar concerns. The people of our world have become so hard-hearted, Paul says. **"They have become filled with every kind of wickedness, evil, greed and depravity. They are full of envy, murder, strife, deceit and malice. They are gossips, slanderers, God-haters, insolent, arrogant and boastful; they invent ways of doing evil; they disobey their parents; they have no understanding, no fidelity, NO LOVE..."** (Rom 1:29-31). Take note of that phrase "no love."

In both passages, Paul catalogues this long list of negative characteristics and behaviors and then, effectively, sums up the condition by saying that people are living toward others "Without love" or "having no love." In each case, he uses the word *astorge* (Greek) to describe this condition. The implication is that part of the reason why people are treating each other so badly is because they suffer from this condition of "astorge." *Astorge* literally means to be "hard-hearted, unfeeling, HEARTLESS." The word "astorge" is actually a compound word. The letter "a" means "without" and the word *Storge* (Greek) literally means AFFECTION (heart-fullness). The first of the four types of LOVE this world desperately needs – and maybe especially now in these last days of conflict and crisis is what the Bible calls AFFECTION.

Growing Affection

Now, what really is "AFFECTION?" Well, in its purest form, the Greek word "storge" or "affection" describes the kind of love that bonds a parent and a nursing baby. Now, true confession, I've never actually nursed a baby! The closest I've gotten to that is supplying a bottle in the middle of the night, but let me wax affectionately about that experience, if I may.

I'm dead tired and fast asleep and our newest baby starts crying. Amy has done all the truly hard work with the baby that day, so I drag myself out of bed, warm up a bottle of mother's milk, and take our son out of the crib. I settle onto the couch in the family room, cradling our baby as he sucks away on that bottle. I'm gazing down at his little pink puckered face and those perfect little eyelashes. And he's staring up at me -- this huge stranger with the serious case of pillow hair. We don't know each other very well yet. He's a terrible conversationalist and can't throw a ball yet. I have morning breath and a chest that's fairly useless. I'd rather be asleep. He'd rather be with mom. But we're there together. And three things are starting to happen.

First of all, something called "NEED-Love" is starting to develop. Our baby NEEDS that milk and some kind of assurance he hasn't been left on a hillside to die, enough to cry hard for it. So, when I reach into his crib, he's sort of pleased to

see me, bad hair and all. The second thing that's happening is that something called "GIFT-Love" is starting to grow. Because I know how to heat up a bottle, I have the capacity to give my child what he needs. After awhile, I come to enjoy making the gift of that bottle to him. And as this interplay of need and gift repeats itself over time, the line between who is the "needer" and who is the "giver" becomes a little blurry.

There's something remarkable happening here. There's this "APPRECIATION-love" that is developing. The baby seems to like the way I smile at him in my arms and I like how wide his eyes become as he looks back at me. We're still mostly strangers, but there is this AFFECTION growing between us. In time, it will become a profoundly greater kind of love. He will regard me as a friend he wants to play with. I will become willing to die for him, even after he has stopped caring about playing with me. But this storge, this type of love that is really all about a growing AFFECTION is the crucial beginning.

Affection is easier to grow where there is an interplay of needs and gifts and an appreciation for the other. But the crucial ingredient in the growth of affection is not personal or mutual advantage. It's not utility so much as FAMILIARITY. You see this with pets. A dog barks at a first-time visitor who has never done it any harm, but wags its tail for an old acquaintance who has never done it any good. My first dog was a springer spaniel named Bounder. Springers are supposed to be bright and beautiful water dogs. Bounder was the dumbest, homeliest spaniel you've ever met and he couldn't swim. We rescued him from drowning dozens of times. But Bounder was there every day when I came home from school and I developed great storge for him.

The funny thing about storge is that you don't notice it beginning. By the time you become aware you feel affection, the experience has long since started – a subtle sense of comfort, connection, or pleasure in the other's company... an awareness of certain needs and gifts... an ability to be in the presence of their quirks or quaint features, "their other way" of being in the world – and somehow not reject but appreciate it.

Storge is what you have the chance to nurture when you're thrown together on a mission trip or in a small group or work group or during a flight delay with a collection of people you would never have chosen as your companions. The power of storge is what gets revealed in movies like the Odd Couple and the Breakfast Club and Enemy Mine and Bridesmaids and the Band of Brothers. It obviously doesn't work every time. As the old saying goes, sometimes familiarity just breeds contempt. Sometimes we need to build walls and erect fences against strangers that would hurt or rob us.

But if I live in a world where I am only with "my kind" of people, with thoroughbred horses, and perfect dogs, and babies that don't cry at night... if I never admit into my circle of familiarity and commitment a Republican or an

evangelical, a refugee or an immigrant, a person of a different race, religion, or way of life, how am I going to grow in my capacity to love? Forget political policy for the moment and think about personal policy. What IS our plan for growing in our capacity to LOVE like GOD loves, and who do you and I need to pursue relationship with to advance that?

In his book, THE FOUR LOVES, C.S. Lewis writes this: "Affection does not expect too much. [It] opens our eyes to goodness we would not have seen or should not have appreciated without it... Affection teaches us first to notice, then to endure, then to smile at, then to enjoy, and, finally to appreciate, the people who 'happen to be there.' Made for us? Thank God, no. They are themselves odder than we could have believed – AND worth far more than we guessed.

Please pray with me...

We have marked your words, Lord. We know **"there will be terrible times in the last days. People will be lovers of themselves and money, boastful, proud, abusive, disobedient, ungrateful, unholy... gossips, slanderers, God-haters... people WITHOUT LOVE..."** (2 Tim 3:1-5; Rom 1:29-31). But you have called out your church to be different, to be the salt and light this earth needs. You have called us to love others the way YOU love. We confess that we don't begin to know how to love at that level. So, we're starting at the bottom, Jesus. Help us to go out this week and start to become familiar with someone who just needs a little affection, and then see where you lead us from there. We pray in your name. Amen.

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U2, "Pride (In the Name of Love)," Unforgettable Fire album (1984).

Paul Francis Webster, Love is a Many Splendored Thing (1955) – won the Academy Award for Best Original Song for a motion picture that year

C.S. Lewis, The Four Loves, p.60

