

*Love, Love, Love*

We say that we love the Steelers; we say we love ice cream; we say we love our homes. We love our parents; we love our children and siblings; we love our husbands and wives. We love our country; we love the church; and we love God. We also love George Clooney and Halle Berry.

The English language limits us because we have only one word “love” to use to describe our highly nuanced feelings about so many different types of relationships. Koine Greek, the Greek of the New Testament, has three different words for the different shades of meaning we see in the word “love.” *Phila* is a Greek word meaning love. It’s the root word of philosophy, which literally means the love of wisdom. It’s also the root word of and the root word of philanthropy, which literally means the love of humanity. We might best define *phila* as a kind of brotherly love, like the way we feel about our country or our Steelers.

*Eros* is another Greek word for love. *Eros* is the root word of erotic. It refers to a carnal or romantic kind of love, like between a husband and wife, or between you and Brad Pitt or you and Angela Jolie. *Agape* is the other Greek word meaning love. *Agape* refers to love in its highest, purest form. The self-giving, self-sacrificing love Christ has for us is the quintessential example of *agape* love. The love Christians should have for one another, the love Christians should have for the whole world, is the *agape* type.

To promote, to share, to spread that kind of love around is the proper goal of parents, and spouses, and the church. Parents should strive to raise their children in an atmosphere where they have a safe foundation from which to grow and reach independence. In the wedding service we pray that husbands and wives will love, forgive, and sacrifice for one another in such a way that they themselves will be a symbol of Christ's to love the world. And in love, the church reaches out to the world live with God's life-giving Word, and assists the needy as we are able.

Even as good and right as love is, love can be tainted, even perverted by sin. Sin permeates everything in this world and some kinds of love can be toxic. One way that love gets twisted is when it becomes too indulgent. I have seen, and I'm sure you have too, parents who just cannot say "No," to their children. Some parents act as if discipline is the opposite of love. Trying to be loving to their children, they give their children anything and everything they want, and let them do however they please without any consequences. That's a recipe for the creation of spoiled, self-centered future adults.

Fortunately for us, God, our Heavenly Father, loves us enough to discipline us. He gives us commandments to follow. For our own good, he sometimes allows us to suffer the consequences of our actions when we transgress His law so that we might learn from them. Although God forgives our sins, He also in His wisdom knows when to discipline those he loves to shape and refine our character, making us more Christ-like.

Another way that loves becomes toxic is when it is too controlling. I have seen, and I am sure you have too, parents or spouses who keep too tight a

rein on their children and husband or wife, dictating all their decisions, and not allowing them any privacy or freedom. It is impossible for one to grow or function as a healthy, mature adult under such conditions. God guides us through his Word, but He also allows us incredible liberty as to how to live our lives within the boundaries He gives us.

Related to a love that becomes toxically controlling is a love that gets ruined by jealousy. All too often in the news we hear about people who harm or even kill their spouses and families saying they love them too much to let them leave them. That's not love; that's just sick. There is no place for violence in a loving relationship.

Trust between partners is important in a relationship, but not all-important. In a marriage for instance, the essence of the relationship between husbands and wives are the promises they make to each other of life long faithfulness. That is the kind of faithfulness commanded by God and only possible with God's help. And that fidelity promised between partners in a marriage isn't just physical, it's emotional and spiritual too.

Love, then, is both a divine gift from God and a tremendous responsibility on the human beings' part. More than just a feeling like *philia* or *eros*, pure agape love commands certain kinds of actions prescribed by God toward those we love, both God and other human beings. Just as God stays with us through good times and bad, so are we to stand by and support those we love through all life's joys and sorrows.

In the First Commandment God tells us that He is a jealous God. What does that mean? Does God engage in petty jealousy like a lovesick teenager? No. But God simply will not tolerate His people worshipping other gods. He alone is Creator. Beside Him there is no other God. God is jealous in the sense that deserves and commands our total devotion. You can't worship God and money, or God and Satan, or God and any other gods, just as you can't have more than one husband or wife at a time.

God's single-minded love for us is seen most clearly in the life of Jesus Christ. Jesus left his heavenly throne for our sake and was born a poor human child. Denying himself the usual creature comforts people seek, such as a family and wealth, Jesus became an itinerant preacher and miracle worker, all the while telling people about God's redeeming love. To show the expanse of God's love, Jesus mingled with the worst kinds of sinners. Those who could not fathom God's infinite love rejected Jesus and persecuted him, he went to the cross and died for our forgiveness. On the third day he rose again, the ultimate proof of the power of love, God's love.

God's love, and its life-giving power, is here for us now. We hear it in the Word. We taste it in the sacrament. We will feel it when we shake hands or embrace when sharing the Peace. Jesus loves us so much that he ignores the huge differences between himself and us. He forgets that he is our Creator and that we are dependent on him for everything, and he calls us his friends. He treats us like colleagues. He treats even better than family. So rejoice in God's love. It wondrous and it surrounds you always. Amen.