

(Preceded by asking the congregation to count the number of times "love" shows up in the text of the second reading.)

So, how many times did you count "love" appearing in the second reading? In our English translations it's 26 times - 28 times if you included "beloved" in your count. In the Greek text love shows up 28 times. That's the same word showing up 28 times in only fifteen verses! I think it's safe to say that the author of 1 John is pretty emphatic about this!

Now, you may have heard that we have only one word in English for love and Koine Greek, the language used in the New Testament, has three words: eros, phileo, and agape. Indeed this is true. Eros referred to erotic love. Phileo and agape are pretty similar, but slightly different. Phileo is usually used to refer to love between relatives. You have words like Philadelphia - the "City of Brotherly Love." Phileo expects a certain exchange to occur. Maybe I do you a favor and I kind of expect you to do a favor for me. Maybe it isn't something calculated or planned, but you expect your love to come back in some sort of benefit. Let's say you mow your neighbor's lawn from time to time. You don't expect payment, but you do think

that when you have need of something - let's say a tool from your neighbor - you have the right to ask and a reasonable expectation that you're going to get it.

Agape refers to a deeper more sacrificial love. Here you are interested in the other person's best interest without any regard for yourself. My colleague the Rev. Craig Swanson explains it this way. Once he met a young man in college who liked a young woman and their relationship was getting serious. He said he loved her but he wasn't sure how much. Craig asked him if he loved this woman enough that he couldn't live without her. The young man replied. "Maybe, but I'm not exactly sure." Craig replied that agape love is when you love someone so much that you can't live without them; however, despite your own desires and needs, you are committed to doing what is in the *other person's* best interest. If she'd be better off with someone else, then you direct her that way despite your own desires.

Now, phileo and agape are sometimes used totally interchangeably. John 21 is an example. It is after the resurrection and we meet Jesus and Peter having a conversation at the shore of the Sea of Galilee. Peter is feeling really bad about his three denials of Jesus at his arrest. Jesus asks

Peter if he loves him. Peter says, "Yes Lord, you know that I love you." Shortly thereafter Jesus asks Peter again. And again Peter says, "Yes, Lord, you now that I love you." Shortly thereafter Jesus asks again, "Do you love me?" In our English translations we have the word love repeated numerous times. In the Greek text phileo and agape are alternated; not for any reason other than to give variety to the story and not be so repetitious; unlike our second reading. So the words can be synonymous for literary effect... with one big exception which we'll get to in a minute.

In most Greek writings of the first century phileo is used more often than agape. Remember phileo is a brotherly love where a certain exchange is expected. But when you turn to New Testament you find agape - a selfless sacrificial love - far more common. Phileo shows up in the New Testament roughly 23 times. Agape shows up maybe 300 hundred times.

The one way that phileo is never used in the New Testament is to refer to the love we have for God or the love God has for us. Then agape is *always* used. Our second reading not only has the English word love repeated 28 times, in Greek agape is repeated 28 times. There is no exchange with phileo for literary variety. In other words, there is no hint whatsoever

of an exchange of favors ever coming into the picture when it comes to our relationship with God; either way - God sacrificially gives to us out of love with no return benefit even hinted at. Similarly, there is to be no hint of a return to us for being loving towards God.

If you've ever found yourself thinking, "God this isn't fair! I'm a good Christian and I love you and do what is right so why is all this rotten stuff happening to me!?" that's not agape. That's a phileo form of love - the form of love the New Testament excludes for our relationship with God.

Perhaps that makes us angry. Perhaps that seems unfair. Why can't we expect some benefit from God for being good and faithful? Why can't we expect our lives to be measurably better because of our relationship with God, than those people who hate or reject God or live counter to God's wishes? Our sense of justice and fairness is offended.

While God does not want to see us suffer, and in fact delights to see us happy, this is not God's way. And it is a good thing.

Somehow, somehow Christianity does this over and over again, that is to begin to think God is cruel, harsh and judgmental. Even when God is portrayed as a loving father, God still comes off as being oppressive.

I was talking to one of the YMCA workers who helps with the child care programs that are run here. He was telling me about some of the things he has done in his past and he regrets doing. He says he knows God won't condemn him, but he still feels like his actions have disappointed God, and he doesn't want to disappoint God.

Perhaps that's an okay feeling, but he still sees God as a force who is judging him and is disappointed. Or said differently, God is not joyful, delightful and wanting to see him flourish as a man.

We all make mistakes. We all push limits, and sometimes push them too far. We may regret what we did, and hopefully we've learned not to do it again. But it is part of a learning and growing process. If you don't take risks, and try out limits and boundaries sometimes you'll never really flourish.

A baby bird may be safe in the nest and its parents may delight in its presence, but sooner later it will develop wings. The only way it will ever fly is to try them out. And that will probably involve a few rough landings; maybe even some outright crashes. Eventually though the bird will learn and be able to fly. The fly with greater confidence, then soar fully and powerfully.

That is what God's agape love desires for us. Sure, God doesn't like it when we miss a landing or crash to the ground - even if it is a shameful ignominious crash. Maybe God is disappointed in us a bit. But what God really wants is for us to try again. God's love and forgiveness gives us the safety we need to keep trying until we flourish.

I'm quite sure God would rather forgive us 1000 times for stupid and unrighteous things than if we stayed perfectly safe and never did anything wrong. If you've never done anything wrong then you've most certainly never done anything right.

Think of someone you love in the agape fashion; perhaps a child or a spouse or a parent or a friend. You invest a lot in them, sacrifice a lot. You put your own wants and desires aside for them and you give without expectation of return. You

delight to see that person flourish and be happy. And very importantly, you want to see them be them. You think that the one thing this world needs is more of that person's life, energy, and personality. That is what God wants for you as God loves you in that way.

May the love of God inspire you to take risks, forgive you your failures, and rejoice to see that love make you flourish. Because through that love of God flourishing in you, you can then inspire it in others. Amen