



Love

Sermon - Kim Thomason

12 September 2021

Today we're continuing our series on discipleship, looking at what God says about love. It's a huge area, so let's pray and ask God to direct our thoughts as we learn together.

Heavenly Father, we know that we have so much to learn about you and your call on our lives. Please direct our thoughts as we learn today. As we reflect on your Word, may your Spirit convict us of the things we need to change and give us the courage to face our circumstances and our fears. Please help us to understand your love more deeply and to embrace your calling to lives that reflect your love. Amen

What do you think of when you hear the word, love? What images come to mind? Family? Friends? Coffee?

Living here in Kiama we certainly do enjoy our coffee and we love our family and friends, but we also appear to love our footy. There are teams and ovals everywhere! We have the Kiama Knights, the Kiama Power, the Quarriers but, I have been assured, we actually love the St George Illawarra Dragons. Well, some do.

I don't know if loving sport is your thing, but we're going to look today at what the Bible has to say about love. The challenge for us is to align our concept of love with what God says about it. We need to understand what God says about love, what love looks like for him, to then understand how God expects us to express love in our daily lives.

In 1 John 4 it says, 'God is love.' That's who he is. God is love. He's not some distant figure in the skies, not some angry, wrathful being ready to catch us out when we do something wrong. God is love.

Love is a relational concept and some of us today may need to consider if our foundational understanding of 'God is love' has perhaps been misinformed by the less-than-ideal relationships that we've had, or currently have in our lives, rather than by what God reveals about himself in the Bible.

When a friend asked me to attend church with her as a teenager, I heard sermons that spoke of God as my Father and I thought that was great. I didn't understand theology, but I knew from experience that fathers are full of love. Yes, they discipline us; yes, they get annoyed sometimes; but their core being is love. So, if the Bible said that 'God is love,' then I could accept that. I didn't know at that age that my upbringing, with a great dad, was a far from common experience. However, God knows and understands exactly where each of us is coming from. He knows our history. He knows all the relationships that have formed us and have shaped our ideas about ourselves, about the world and our thinking about God, and he longs to show us who he really is. He longs to heal our hurts. 'God is love.' And if you'd like to talk with one of the ministry team and explore this further, please contact them through the church office. The details are on the website. Now whilst 1 John 4:16 says, 'God is love', what does that mean? What does that look like?

Probably one of the most famous Bible verses found in the gospels is John 3:16.

'For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.'

God loved the world **so much** that gave his Son. He sent Jesus to live amongst us, to show us what God is like – in the things he said, the things he did, the religious structures and assumptions that he challenged - and, ultimately, to die the most horrendous, humiliating death on a cross. But then he defeated death by rising again, which is what we celebrate on Easter Sunday.

‘God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son.’ That’s what love looks like!

Does the image of the cross come to mind when you think of love? Because it does for God. And did you notice the detail in that verse? God didn’t delegate our redemption to the work of an angel; he didn’t use one of the men already condemned by the Romans to die by crucifixion; God sent his one and only Son.

God’s love for us, to forgive our sins, cost him deeply. God-in-Christ reconciling the world to himself. Why did he do it? Because that’s who he is. God is love.

And God demonstrated his love by sending Jesus while we were still sinners...while we were still estranged. It’s by God’s grace that we are saved. God sent Jesus because he loved the world so much, so much that **whoever** believes in him will have eternal life. All are welcome to believe. God loved the world, not just bits of his creation, not just one particular language group or geographical area but...‘the world’.

Isn’t that amazing! The God who created the universe loves us.

Today is the commencement of National Marriage Week. Whilst many couples can testify to their marriage being a loving, lifelong commitment, there are many other people, of all faiths, for whom their marriage has been, and currently is, less than ideal. According to the 2021 National Anglican Family Violence Research Project

approximately 22% of Anglicans have experienced violence in an intimate adult relationship. 22%! The Australian Institute of Health and Welfare 2018 report states that intimate partner violence causes more illness, disability and deaths than any other risk factor for women aged 25-44...violence by intimate partners in supposedly loving adult relationships.

Are we shocked by those statistics? I think we should be shocked and horrified and absolutely determined to address the Domestic and Family Violence that exists in our society.

As we talk about love today, please understand that coercive relationships are not love. Domestic and family violence is wrong. God does not condone abuse. The example of God's love in Jesus says, 'I'll die for **you**.' But what does the abuser say? The abuser says, '**You** die for **me**.' It's an evil inversion of love. The Bible speaks very clearly about injustice and the Anglican church of Australia is committed to the prevention of abuse and the response of care and compassion towards those affected by violence.

Jesus teaches on love throughout the gospels and in Mark Chapter 12, one of the teachers of the law asks, 'Of all the commandments, which is the most important?' It's an interesting question and Jesus gives him an even more interesting response. Instead of prioritising them one to ten, Jesus summarises them into two.

'The most important one,' [he says,] 'is this: Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.'

We are to love God. Not to hold anything back but to love God with every fibre of our being – heart, soul, mind, strength. And why should

we do this? We do this because God is love and his love is demonstrated in sending Jesus. Costly, undeserved, sacrificial love. We love God because he first loved us.

‘The second is this;’ [says Jesus,] ‘Love your neighbour as yourself. There is no commandment greater than these.’

Love God, love neighbours. Got it!

But who is my neighbour? Those in my Local Government Area? Live in the same street? What’s God’s definition of a neighbour?

In Luke’s gospel we have the Parable of the Good Samaritan that Jesus told in response to the question, ‘Who is my neighbour?’ You see, if we can define the concept of neighbour within a geographical boundary or within the realm of a shared religious view, then we can limit our love (some might prefer to think of it as focussing our love) on those with a shared commonality. We’ll be able to define our target audience, articulate some key performance indicators and measure our success. Maybe we’ll have some things to learn but, basically, we’ll set our goals, achieve our outcomes and come out feeling pretty positive.

However, in this parable, Jesus challenges the thinking that says neighbours are the people we already know and love and who think, and act just like us. In this parable, neighbours are strangers - people who hold different worldviews, have different religious beliefs. We’re being challenged to move beyond who we know and what is culturally comfortable, to demonstrate God’s love to everyone.

It’s worth noting here that this parable did not require the Samaritan to convert the man to his religious beliefs. The Samaritan did not have to do everything for the man nor broker world peace in his spare time. Let’s not make it bigger than it already is and start to dismiss our calling as though it’s too big and, therefore, too hard and so we won’t

even try. The Samaritan didn't wait to like the other person, to like their religion, their worldview or their behaviour. Rather the Samaritan is commended for his choice to render assistance to the man in need, irrespective of their cultural differences. Jesus tells the teacher of the law to '*Go and do likewise.*' The teacher of the law has a choice to make. So do we.

Love is a choice. So, God loved us first. We are to love God. We are to love our neighbours. Got it! But what does that look like?

Let's dig a bit deeper and go way back to the first book of the Bible - Genesis Chapter 1. This is where God says, '*Let us make mankind in our image.*' The triune God is creating – Father, Son and Spirit working in perfect harmony to create people...in their image. That doesn't mean that people necessarily reflect God's attributes well because, let's face it, we so often don't. Rather, being made in God's image means we have a divine status bestowed on us, an identity that sets us apart from the rest of creation. If we believe that God made humans in his image, then all of humanity comes under the banner of 'neighbour'. We can't differentiate and expect God to be okay with our choices to love only some of his creation. We can't ignore the people who think differently, or the ones with different cultures and worldviews or the ones whose doctrine and expressions of traditions differ to those we hold dear. If all people have been created in God's image, then all people are our neighbours and we're called to love everyone. And it's a big call. And it's quite possibly uncomfortable and challenging and difficult but a deep understanding of the depth of God's love for us, will compel us to love others.

All others! ... Everywhere!

And this brings us to the passage read for us today from 1 Corinthians which is primarily about the expression of self-sacrificing, other-oriented love that Paul places at the core of Christian community. Paul wants us to be in no doubt about the importance of love. Paul says that no matter what I do, if speak in tongues, move mountains, fathom all mysteries, give all my possessions to the poor, without love, I gain nothing, I am nothing.

If love is so important then, how does Paul explain what it looks like? Paul begins by saying that love is patient and kind. It's a choice that we make. Are we sharing our resources with the poor and the marginalised? Do our actions align with our theology that says God made all people in his image? Do we speak kindly **to** people and **about** people? Publicly and privately. We may kid ourselves that what we say in the privacy of our own homes is okay, but Paul's words challenge us to align our public words with our private hearts because he offers no delineation between public and private. Love is kind. All the time. To everyone.

We need to become so grounded in God's love for us that love becomes the core of who we are too.

Without love we are nothing.

The passage in 1 Corinthians continues. Love does not envy, does not boast, is not proud, does not dishonour others, is not self-seeking, is not easily angered and it keeps no record of wrongs. In other words, love seeks the best for other people and forgives them...which is the story of the cross. God offers us forgiveness through Jesus' death and resurrection – undeserved, freely offered, suffering, costly love.

And we love because God first loved us.

Do you recall the second part of Jesus' response to the question, *'Of all the commandments, which is the most important?'* It's, *'Love your neighbour as yourself.'* When we understand that love is a choice, expressed both in our words and our actions, we shift our focus and move from being reactive to circumstances and concerned about ourselves, to humble, proactive service seeking the best for others. We seek to treat others gently, to work with them, to forgive readily and to treat them as we would want to be treated ourselves.

Here in Kiama, I believe we are being called to set aside our doctrinal differences, to demonstrate God's love through our choice to actively love and support one another and to serve this community together. It's a choice. We have an opportunity to be clothed, as the writer of Colossians says, *'with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience.'* We are to *'bear with each other and forgive one another'* just as we have been forgiven by God. Love is to be our overarching virtue, binding all the others together in perfect unity.

As we read in 1 Corinthians 13, love always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. There is absolutely no room for pride or arrogance in our attitudes or in our relationships. There's not even wiggle room for a bit of Pharisee-like self-righteousness that claims a monopoly on accurate Biblical interpretation or to know the right and only way to uphold church traditions.

All people are created in God's image. God so loved the world that **whoever** believes in him will have eternal life.

Paul says that we can fathom all mysteries and have all the knowledge in the world, but without love, we are nothing.

We are called to love.

Love is a choice. ... Let's make it!