



247 Broad Street | Red Bank NJ 0770
(732) 747-0446 | www.umcredbank.org

February 17, 2019

More Love: Eros

Proverbs 30:18-19

There are three things that amaze me—no, four things that I don't understand: how an eagle glides through the sky, how a snake slithers on a rock, how a ship navigates the ocean, how a man loves a woman.

Song of Solomon 8:6-7

Set me as a seal upon your heart, as a seal upon your arm; for love is strong as death, passion fierce as the grave. Its flashes are flashes of fire, a raging flame. Many waters cannot quench love, neither can floods drown it. If one offered for love all the wealth of his house, it would be utterly scorned.

SERMON - More Love: Eros

"All You Need is Love", "What the World Needs Now is Love", "Looking for Love in All the Wrong Places" These are all songs that at one time or another were popular best sellers. "Can You Feel the Love Tonight?" by Elton John is considered by some, the greatest love song of all-time. It staggers the mind to think of how many love songs have been written throughout the ages!

Love is one of those universals that binds people together from different cultures and races – for we all know love. Whether we've fallen in love ourselves, or not, we have – at one point or another – experienced the gift of love in our lives, no matter how big or small. As Christians, we know something about love too! We are called to love --- to love God, and to love our neighbor as ourselves. Those are the two greatest commandments that Jesus lifted up for his followers. LOVE. And I'd argue that one of the best ways to experience God is to share your love with another.... As Jean Val Jean sung it in *Les Miserable*, "To love another person is to see the face of God."

But what does that mean in our lives? What does it look like to love someone or something? What does it mean to be loving in our words and actions?

The word "love" is a flexible term in the English language. Which explains how a person can say "I love tacos" in one sentence and "I love my wife" in the next. Love can mean a lot of different things. While the English language tries to capture it all in one word, the ancient Greek language in which the New Testament was written, has four distinct words used to describe the over-arching concept we refer to as "love." Those words are agape, phileo, storge, and eros. Today we embark on a 3-week worship series, delving deeply into the ways we are called to love one another. We'll tackle phileo and storge next week (the love of friends and family, respectively), and self-less agape love the week after. But, today, we jump in with eros, the word used to describe romantic or sexual love. The term also portrays the idea of passion and intensity of feeling. The word was originally connected with the goddess Eros of Greek mythology.

Of the four Greek terms that describe love in the Bible, eros is probably the most familiar today. It's easy to see the connection between eros and our modern word "erotic." And there are certainly similarities between those two terms — as well as a few differences. Our modern term "erotic" is often associated with ideas or practices that are naughty or inappropriate. This wasn't the case with eros. Instead, eros described the healthy, common expressions of physical love. In the Scriptures, eros primarily refers to those expressions of love carried out between a married couple.

It's worth mentioning that the Greek word eros itself is nowhere to be found in the Bible. The New Testament never directly addresses the topic of passionate, romantic love. And when the New Testament writers did address the topic of sexuality, it was usually in terms of providing proper boundaries or prohibiting harmful behavior. Here's an example from Paul's first letter to the Corinthians 7:8-9: "I say to the unmarried and to widows: It is good for them if they remain (celibate) as I am. But if they do not have self-control, they should marry, for it is better to marry than to burn with desire."

But, strange as it may sound, the Old Testament **does** broach the topic of romantic love. Since the Old Testament was written in Hebrew, rather than in Greek, we still don't find the word EROS there, but rather it's Hebrew counterpart, DOD... a very romantic sounding word. In fact, the concept of intimate, romantic love – eros or dod - is very well illustrated all throughout the book known as Song of Solomon, or Song of Songs. Our second reading came from the 7th chapter, with that familiar phrase, "Set me as a seal upon your heart", and here's another sample from the 1st chapter: "Oh, that he would kiss me with the kisses of his mouth! For your love is more delightful than wine. The fragrance of your perfume is intoxicating; your name is perfume poured out."

If I was to keep reading, it could get a bit steamy in here! You might be taken back to know that these verses made their way into the Bible, but it's an interesting point... that the Bible does not shy away from the reality of romantic love – nor even from the sensations of physical passion. Indeed, the Scriptures elevate physical love when experienced within the proper boundaries. Within healthy, committed relationships, it is celebrated as a gift from God. Not dirty or sinful (as has been the message communicated to many by the Christian church), but God's good gift. God created us this way, with nerve endings in our body and the hormones that set them on fire. In the opening story of our bible, we find a couple clinging together – a euphemism for intimacy – and they become one flesh – another

euphemism. They were walking around in the garden of Eden naked and unashamed – it was something beautiful and good, not something to hide or be embarrassed about.

The physical act of love has a way of physically and emotionally binding us within relationships. Journalist Mary Roach and writers at Psychology Today offer a scientific understanding for the jump in your heart when you see your beloved, or the feelings you have after being affectionate with them. When we see the object of our desire, our brains become flooded with dopamine. When we experience an event with our loved ones, we become saturated with oxytocin, the pleasure chemical. Our natural response is to keep this neuro-chemical process going—our brains are literally pleasure junkies, finding ways for us to flood them with oxytocin over and over, whether it is with food or gambling—anything that provides a rush.

Like anything meant for good, it can be and has been twisted and perverted, used for evil and harm. When the physical pleasure that accompanies eros becomes an end in itself, rather than a means of experiencing and expressing the intimacy of love and relationship, the potential for harm is right around the corner. And when sexual pleasure is found at the expense of the dignity, value, or health and wellbeing of another person, this good gift becomes a curse. Throughout history and spanning cultures, people have fallen victim to the obsession with the physicality of eros through pornography, human trafficking, and prostitution. These are not the eros love that we are called to – in fact they are the expressions of brokenness that we are called to fight against and work to dismantle the systems of oppression within them.

Friends, on this Valentine's Day weekend, when romantic love is in the air, I invite you to hear and celebrate with me God's good gift of eros love. If you are in a relationship, take time to celebrate the love and intimacy that binds you together... and say a prayer of thanks for it and for your beloved. If you are a parent or grandparent, I invite you to talk, in healthy, life-affirming ways, about sexuality and responsible use of this good gift of God. While the schools teach sex education – about the development of the bodies and the mechanics of making babies – it is still our job to teach the morality, the lessons of right and wrong, and how to use intimacy in healthy and faithful ways. And most of all, as we go out into our week, with this call to love one another... let us remember that our love for God should ground all that we are and do... May we go into our week singing with the joy of love, remembering that, "All you need is love!" Amen.