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More Love: Family & Friends

Proverbs 3: 3-4

Do not let loyalty and faithfulness forsake you; bind them around your neck, write them on the tablet of your heart. So you will find favor and good repute in the sight of God and of people.

Ephesians 4: 1-3

I therefore, the prisoner in the Lord, beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.

Last week we opened a three-week series delving into the different forms of love, as we find them in the Bible. While our English word LOVE is used to cover a wide range of types and degrees of love, like our love for tacos, friends, and our partners, the Hebrew and Greek languages have different words for these different categories. I opened the series on Valentine's weekend focusing on Eros love –romantic love, and spoke of how our sexuality is God's good gift, and should be treated as such. Next week, we'll turn to the self-less agape love that Jesus models for us and calls us to live out, even, and especially when there is no benefit for us in acting lovingly.

This week, our focus turns to two Greek words, which we'll take together – Storge and Phileo – the love of family and friends respectively. Storge is a term for love in the Bible that describes the affectionate bond that develops naturally between parents and children, and among siblings. Phileo is used to talk about the love that binds together friends in a mutually beneficial relationship. You hear the root of this word in Philadelphia – "the city of brotherly love." The Greek word phileo doesn't mean "brotherly love" specifically, but it does carry the meaning of a strong emotional connection that goes beyond acquaintances or casual friendships. Phileo is the most general type of love in Scripture, I would even dare to say, it would cover our love for tacos! It encompasses our love for fellow humans, care, respect, and compassion for people in need. It is used in our scriptures to describe the caring relationships between fellow Christians. Jesus said phileo would be an identifier of his

followers: "By this everyone will know that you are my disciples if you love one another." (John 13:35, NIV)

In my life, because of moving around so much (as a PK), my sisters are my only life-long friends. The storge love that binds us is an incredible gift in my life. It's powerful, and life giving – like the love I have for my daughters! I never needed to try to love them... I just do! In more recent years, I have made and developed other friendships – mostly with other clergywomen, who I can share the joys and challenges of life, ministry, and family with – and what a gift these friendships are for me ---- and likewise for them. Sometimes it's me reaching out needing to talk, a shoulder to cry on... and sometimes its them, needing to unburden their minds and hearts. There is a give and a take – a shared journey that helps the weight of life feel a little less crushing! Through phileo, we are reminded that no person is an island! We were made to live into these connections of relationship! Relationship is what brought me back to the church after drifting away in college. I missed the relationships I shared with fellow church goers... the honest life and faith conversations that we naturally have within a church community. Belief I could do on my own, but living my faith out... that, I needed a phileo community for!

And this phileo love within a community doesn't only happen in a church setting. I came across a story about a girl named Sam this week – a two year old who is deaf. Despite her barrier to connecting with those around her, Sam loves to communicate with anyone who can speak sign language with her. Seeing this extraordinary girl, the community of neighbors all chipped in and hired a sign language instructor and immersed themselves in classes together. The teacher reflected that it's not that uncommon for a deaf child's parents to not even take the time to learn sign language... but for this whole neighborhood to step up and learn for the sake of one little girl, was a HUGE gift of love! It is amazing what a community of phileo love can do with and for one another. We can make each other better people... and this world a better, more loving place.

But unfortunately, even this binding mutual love is not as easy as we'd hope it could be. We've all had friendships that have drifted apart for one reason or another, no matter how close you once were – and while we mourn for lost friendships, we often simply let them drift and go their own ways. But within the church... whether it be a local church, or the larger Christian community or denominational organization... these drifting aparts are not quite so easy to manage... they're not so simple to disconnect from... nor is it clear whether we should work to maintain them, or simply bless them on their separate ways.

In our second scripture reading this morning from Ephesians, Paul was writing to the church in Ephesus... a church that was obviously trying to figure out what it meant to be a community of individuals walking this faith journey together. In the first century, many Jews and Gentiles struggled to accept the message of reconciliation of Jews and Gentiles (cf. Galatians, Acts 10-15). God's gift of reconciliation means that those who were once understood to be "far off" are now those who are equally gifted by God. How should they rely on one another? How should they manage their communal lives... because as ideal as a group of Christians gathering together should be... we are still a group of imperfect people with opinions that differ... We don't all think alike or even believe alike... and conflict is bound to happen in even the holiest of communities! Paul's advice is this... life out your

calling! Jesus laid out two very basic rules... love God and love your neighbor... do that and everything else should fall into place. Live into that calling of love, and all the small stuff would figure itself out. A Paul give us a few relationship tips that will help you do this... be humble and gentle --- two straight from the beatitudes! Be patient with each other and bear with one another in love... even when you feel like you're at the end of your rope... take a breath. Know that no one is perfect... not others, and not you either. Be gracious in the face of imperfections, and love one another in such a way that together, you will all be better for it!

I pray that this is a message that we take to heart as we work out conflicts within our family and friend circles, and our church. But I can't help but look even broader than our own immediate circles and local church stuff this morning... As we gather for worship this weekend, the General Conference of the United Methodist Church has convened for a special session to discuss and decide on the denominational stance on human sexuality.

As this body of the UMC gathers in St. Louis to discern our way forward, my prayer is for unity, grace and healing. I pray that Paul's words to the Ephesians might permeate the delegates hearts and remind them to live lives worthy to our calling, with humility, gentleness, patience, and bearing with one another in love. I pray that a way to unity may be found, but more than my care for any institution, my concern is for all those who have been wounded, rejected, turned away, or burned by the church. I know that people on all sides of the debate are praying that the "right plan" will pass. But let our primary concern be for the people - the individuals whom God has entrusted to our care. Let the *phileo* love that our Ephesians text reminds us of, center our hearts on the people within our communities, and those who've been pushed out. The good news of God's love and abundant grace we know through Christ will still be the heart of our message – before and after General Conference... and there are people who are aching to know the love and grace of God.

It is my prayer this day that we all know the gifts of *storge* and *phileo* love in our relationships, in our homes, in our churches, in our communities, and Dear Lord, if possible, in our denomination as well. And as we sing the words from John's gospel, let them be our prayer this day and all days, "They will know we are Christians by our love." May it be so. Amen.