

Genesis 1:26–27 (NIV)

²⁶ Then God said, “Let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness, so that they may rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky, over the livestock and all the wild animals, and over all the creatures that move along the ground.”

²⁷ So God created mankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.

Matthew 22:34–40 (NIV)

³⁴ Hearing that Jesus had silenced the Sadducees, the Pharisees got together. ³⁵ One of them, an expert in the law, tested him with this question: ³⁶ “Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law?”

³⁷ Jesus replied: “ ‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.’ ³⁸ This is the first and greatest commandment. ³⁹ And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ ⁴⁰ All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments.”

We spend our whole life embedded in a web of relationships. Some are enduring, others are fleeting. Some are deep and rich, others are shallow and impoverished. But they are all inescapable. What is God’s hope for the relationships that comprise our existence?

This week, we begin a five-week series on relationships. That isn’t really much time to consider topics ranging from marriage to family to friendships to the workplace and so on. Thus, we will focus on the basics of humans and our relationships with other humans. And getting to the basics requires us to know where to begin. Contrary to what you’d find in your typical college psychology, anthropology, or sociology class, we’ll begin with God. As Christians we claim that there is a God who has made himself known to us and who crafted us in his image. Thus, if we are to understand ourselves, we’d best begin with our maker.

There are several ways to understand this making-in-the-image, but all of them are profound, for of all God’s creatures it is only humans who bear God’s image. Thus, we shouldn’t be surprised that there is some measure of correspondence between our maker and us. This is not to say that God is merely a bigger or more powerful or better version of ourselves, but it is to say that God loves and we are called to love, that God pursues justice and we are to pursue justice, that God pours out mercy and we are to do likewise. And there is no more fundamentally Christian statement about God than our claim that this one Creator is inherently relational, a community of three persons locked in love from all time, for all time.

This Relational God

Despite the pantheons of gods offered up by competing religions, the ancient Jews had always insisted that there was one, and only one, God – YHWH -- who had created all that there is and had chosen Israel to be the means of creation’s renewal. For a decade after Jesus, all the believers in Jesus were Jews, just as Jesus was a Jew. As such, these early Christians remained fervent monotheists. But this soon posed a significant problem for them. Jesus said and did things that only God could say and do. Who was this Jesus? Could he possibly be God himself? But how could this be if there is only one God?

In the writings of the New Testament, we can see the first Christians coming to understand that God had revealed, through Jesus, his deeper nature. Namely, that while there is unity in God (yes, there is one God!) there is also community, fellowship, and love in God’s very being. In many ways, John’s gospel is written to convince readers that Jesus is fully God. From this beginning, Christians came to understand and proclaim that God is triune – one God, three persons.

Without question, for many Christians the whole notion of the Trinity is one of the most perplexing and seemingly irrelevant doctrines of the faith. Though we might affirm a statement something like this, “We believe in one God, who has always known himself as the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit,” it can be pretty hard for us to see how this makes much sense or how it matters to our lives as Christians. Yet, our belief in a personal, triune God is foundational to all that makes Christianity unique among the world’s major religions.

God is love

We proclaim that there is one God consisting of three persons who have always been, are now, and always shall be a loving community of three, the Trinity. This truth about God makes John’s statement, “God is love,” (1 John 4:8,16) not mere sentiment, but a concrete statement of God’s being. After all, did John mean that God loves more than anyone? Or that God loves without ceasing? Or perhaps that God loves truly? All this is accurate, but it isn’t the same thing as saying that God is love. The simple statement “God is love,” seems almost nonsensical. Love must have an object. We love something or we love someone. How could any single person, in isolation, be love?

However, when we proclaim that God is unity in three persons, then the statement that God is love makes perfect sense. God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit have always been, are now, and always will be in loving relationship with one another. God is love because God is inherently relational. The loving relationships among the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit form the basis of God’s very essence. The three persons of the Godhead live in eternal community, in a loving community of three persons. Indeed, it is from God’s love that we learn the true meaning of love. As John writes: “We know love by this, that he laid down his life for us – and we ought to lay down our lives for one another” (1 John 3:16). *The triune God is both lover and beloved.*

This is where John Wesley’s personal theology and, hence, United Methodist beliefs begin: “God is love.” In the lyrics of Charles Wesley, John’s brother: “Love divine all loves excelling, joy of heaven, to earth come down.” The Wesley brothers understood that it is love and grace that define God. Grace is simply love in action. The cross, the sacrifice and faithfulness it embodied, takes us to the heart, the essence, of God. As Paul writes in his letter to the Ephesians: “God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved— and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places . . . For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God.” (from 2:4-8).

“Love is . . .”

Being made in the image of the God-who-is-love, we are called to love God and to love others. Jesus said those two brief commands sum up all of God’s love and must inform every single one of our relationships.

But what is love? Really? If we are going to get anywhere with this series, we have to begin with the biblical meaning of love. And this will not be easy for us. The gulf between the biblical and the secular understandings of love is so vast that it renders the word “love” nearly useless to us. For much of the world, love is all about romance and wonderful feelings. It is about that ecstatic experience of new love, of being “in love” which, as exhilarating as it might be, is no more than the light of a candle compared to the brilliant sunlight that is God’s love, a love to which God calls us. So we’ll try to come to this topic with a bit of a blank slate. There are three keys to the biblical understanding of love: (1) love is a bond of total trust and commitment (2) love is about actions, not feelings, and (3) the best synonym for love is sacrifice.

Trust and commitment

Though there are many dimensions of love in the Old Testament, including the romantic and sexual in the Song of Solomon, the dominant love theme is covenantal. God loves his people and the people are to love God within the bounds of a covenant that binds them in mutual obligation. Though the covenant is never devoid of passion, it is focused upon trust,

high regard for each other, faithfulness, and obedience. We'll see in this series that God uses marriage as a metaphor for this covenantal love. For example, the people are not to commit "adultery" against God by chasing after false gods. Seven centuries before Jesus, God would speak through his prophet Hosea of his love for his people in shockingly personal terms. There was simply no parallel in the ancient cultures.

Jesus and the New Testament writers built upon the Old Testament understanding of love. Indeed, Jesus cleared up any possible confusion about this covenantal love. Love is total trust, total commitment – the neighbor whom we are to love becomes anyone in need, even (especially?) our enemy. And, as in the Old Testament, this is no abstract love of humanity – it is about what we do. Authentic love calls us to the hard work of repentance and discipline, of forgiveness and caring.

Actions, not feelings

Though, in keeping with the Old Testament law, Jesus teaches that the two greatest commandments are to love God and neighbor, he actually doesn't throw around the word "love" very often. Instead, Jesus speaks of mercy, caring, kindness, and forgiveness. Jesus, and later Paul, constantly reminds the disciples that love is not about what we *feel*, it is about what we *do*. Are we patient with others? Are we kind? Do we resist the temptation to boast or envy? Do we even avoid being irritable toward others? (1 Cor 13:4). Understanding that love is about actions, not sentiment, makes sense of Jesus' teaching to "Love your enemies" (Matthew 5:44). Though we may not have loving feelings toward our enemies, we can still be merciful, caring, and forgiving. We cannot control how we feel, but we can control what we do – and God calls us to "do love." Not merely to say or feel it, but to do it.

Love as sacrifice

John cuts to the heart of this in 1 John 3:16: "We know love by this, that he laid down his life for us—and we ought to lay down our lives for one another." What the New Testament means by love is the cross. The cross is the concrete embodiment of love. God so loved the world that he gave up the life of his own son. Jesus so loved us all that he laid down his own life. If we want to know what love is, look to the cross. The essence of love is sacrifice. Love is self-giving, never self-seeking. But what has gone wrong? Why are relationships often so infuriatingly hard? That is our question for next week.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. A good biblical synonym for faith is trust. A good synonym for hope is confidence. And a good synonym for love is sacrifice. What thoughts come to mind as you reflect upon love and sacrifice? For some, it seems to open the door to abuse. There is certainly plenty of opportunity for a self-seeker to abuse a self-giver. But if we accept that the Bible points us to love as sacrificial and self-giving, what might this tell us about marriage or any other loving relationship?
2. John writes "God is love." Our belief in the Trinity – one God who has always existed in three persons – reveals that God is inherently relational, that God is inherently loving, that God is inherently a loving community of three persons. We, in turn, are created in God's image. What might this say about the nature of the loving relationships we have with others? To put it another way, when we embrace the image of God within ourselves, how does this affect the way we relate to others?
3. In the New Testament, love is not a feeling or even an idea. It is the concrete expression of Jesus' self-sacrificial death on the cross. "We know love by this, that he laid down his life for us – and we ought to lay down our lives for others." (1 John 3:16) We look to Jesus' life to see what love really is. True love for God and neighbor is an expression of our repentance, transformation, discipline, and sacrifice. How can Jesus' example of sacrificial love transform our own notions of what it means to love others? How is your love for others seen in your own concrete actions? How is your love for God seen in your actions? Do we ask enough of ourselves or is our love limited to that for which we can find some extra time and effort in our busy lives?

Daily Bible Readings

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

Monday, Deuteronomy 6 The great commandment to love God. Note that God's love is seen in what God has done for the Israelites.	Tuesday, Leviticus 19:9-18 What does it mean to love our neighbor? Here are some concrete examples from 3,300 years ago.
Wednesday, Song of Solomon 3:1-5 A dream of love. The romantic and very personal dimensions of love between a man and a woman.	Thursday, 1 Corinthians 13 Paul's poem of love.
Friday, Philemon Paul's plea, made out of love for this slave, to Onesimus on Philemon's behalf.	Weekly Prayer Concerns

Scott Engle's Weekday Bible Classes

Join us whenever you can. Each week's lesson stands on its own. This is very "drop-in." Bring something to eat if you like. Bring a study Bible. On occasion Scott has to cancel class, so if you are coming for the first time, you can check www.scottengle.org to make sure the class is meeting.

Monday Evening Class – now studying Romans

Meets from 7:00 to 8:15 in Piro Hall

Tuesday Lunchtime Class – now studying Exodus

Meets from 11:45 to 1:00 in Piro Hall

Scott's 11:00 Sunday Class in Festival Hall

This is a large, lecture-oriented class open to all ages.

The current series:

Doing the Right Thing: Learning to Make Moral Choices

**Scott's New Book, *Restart: Getting Past Christian-ish*,
is available in the St. Andrew bookstore.**

Scott's Weekly Bible Studies are available at www.standrewumc.org. Just go to "worship" and then "sermons." You'll find the study with each week's recorded sermon. There is also a complete archive of the studies at www.scottengle.org

Sermon Notes
