

# *A Spiritual Spring for the Week*

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Sermon Text: 1 John 4:7-11

Sermon Title: "Keeping the Ship Afloat: Fellowship"

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John could have been the original Love Guru. When it comes to the subject of love, John talks about it the most, using the word *love* dozens of times more than the other Gospel writers use it. Our most famous verse comes from John's Gospel, and the fourth word in that verse is love: "For God so *loved* the world that he sent his only begotten Son, so that whoever may believe in him may not perish but have everlasting life." So, if we are going to talk about fellowship today, who better to turn to than John, especially to John's letters toward the end of the Bible.

Let us start with a verse that might be a bit troublesome for us. John says in verse 8, "Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love." This verse might be troublesome, because we don't feel loving all the time. We have our days when people seem to get on our nerves, and we don't want to deal with their issues or complaints. We would rather have people leave us alone: "Don't bother to talk to me, or I might bite off your head." This is really bad if we are

cashiers at a store, or bank tellers, or teachers, occupations in which we have to deal with people. We might find ourselves biting our tongues to keep us from saying something sarcastically cutting.

We didn't have much love for the umpires during the last Braves game on Friday, calling what should have been an error an out. We don't feel too loving toward South Carolina fans, after their team trounced Georgia. But John says that whoever does not love does not know God, so what do we do on our off-days?

Let us go back to the verse just before verse 8. Verse 7 says, "Beloved." Stop there for a moment. Don't keep reading until we face this word, "Beloved." What is John doing here? What is he saying about us? Beloved is a term of affection, so John could be using the word to address us with respect. It would be like calling a man "sir" or a woman "ma'am." But more is going on here. John uses the Greek word *agape*, and we all know that *agape* is that big important kind of love. It is unconditional love. It is unrestrained and unending love. "For God so loved the world..." God had that *agape* love for us, and it was without restrictions and without conditions that his only Son came to earth. God didn't say to us, "If you stop being a sinner, then I will transform you." He didn't even say, "If you ask for forgiveness, then I will

love you.” God set everything in motion before we could do a thing. God set it up for us not only to say we are sorry but also to receive pardon. God set it up for us to escape our sin which has such a strong pull on us. That is *agape* love – doing for us what we could never do, and taking the first steps even while we were still sinners.

So John calls us beloved, and he uses that word *agape* to describe us. We are unconditionally loved by God. Nothing can interrupt that. Nothing can sever that. We who believe in the Lord Jesus Christ, we who accept his death and resurrection as our only form a rescue from our sinful lives, we are beloved.

And since God never stops loving us, God puts within us the potential of never stop loving others. We are born of God. God is a part of us, and so is his *agape* love. God gives us *agape* love for others. We may love them without restrictions, without conditions. I was reading a book, in which the author says that we are great storehouses of God’s grace and mercy and love, but we are also great distribution centers that hand out that grace and mercy and love to people we come in contact with. This is why we are *beloved*.

But didn’t we just say that we have those off-days?

Didn't we just say that people can get on our nerves, and we might attack them with hurtful, unloving words? What we are dealing with here is feelings, emotions. Emotions come and go, depending on whether the day is sunny or rainy, hot or cold. My family and I visited Disney World during the Fall School Break, and although the parks were fun to visit, the Florida weather was muggy and hot. We did not feel too loving, as we sweated buckets of water from one ride to another. We definitely felt more loving in the air-conditioning.

*Agape* love does not deal with emotions. It is not turned on or off by how we feel or what our attitudes might be. *Agape* love is. It constantly flows to us and through us. We might not notice such *agape* love, because we allow emotions or attitude to rule our days. But *agape* love is there under the surface (so to speak). We may find it if we look. We are beloved, not "could be beloved" or "might be beloved." We are beloved always, storehouses and distributions centers. Emotions do not change this.

When we attack somebody (a friend, a spouse, a child) with hurtful words, we feel awful about what we said. We cannot take it back and we feel bad. It's like the Tom Hanks quote from that 1998 movie *You've Got Mail*, in which he says, "Someone upsets you and

instead of smiling and moving on, you zing them. ‘Hello, it’s Mr. Nasty...’ On the other hand, I must warn you that when you finally have the pleasure of saying the thing you mean to say at the moment you mean to say it, remorse inevitably follows.” That remorse is *agape* peeking through our cutting words and reminding us that we are born of God. God loves people unconditionally, and so do we.

We have those days in which we don’t want people around. I have those moments, even as a pastor. I need my I-time, my introverted time, in which nobody is around to bother me. But it doesn’t last long. If you are like me, after some time you feel bad about wanting to be alone. You realize that something is wrong, and we feel bad that maybe we have pushed people away from us unnecessarily. We don’t want to act that way. *Agape* surfaces again, reminding us that we cannot be alone forever. We need God to love, and to love us. We need others to love, and to love us.

*Agape* love turns selfishness into selflessness. *Agape* turns anger and hatred into concern and compassion and willingness to be a part of other’s lives.

God’s *agape* love shows us how to be in fellowship with one another. It shows us how to get along, how

to work together, how to share hopes and fears, and how to move forward toward God's kingdom. The fellowship of our congregation is vital. Of all the things that are important to us, fellowship is Number One. Being a part of a group of people who are warm and welcoming. Getting together with others in Sunday Schools and Life Groups. Knowing almost every person in this place, and being happy to see them every week. Missing people when they are away or sick, and reaching out to them through a phone call or visit. The *agape* love of God constantly flows strongly through us and around us, deepening our appreciation for each other, loving each other with genuine, open hearts. We all feel it. It doesn't matter if we are in Kids' Club or Youth Group or some adult study group. It doesn't matter if one person is a youth or child and the other is an adult. We all feel that *agape* love. It is here, at times flowing so strongly that we cannot miss it, at times flowing quietly yet compellingly in all our interactions.

Our fellowship has moved us through all sorts of joys and triumphs, even through struggles and doubts. We greatly appreciate our fellowship, when the doubts arise. When struggles come our way, we look to God's *agape* love among ourselves, and we see

it is here. It is ready to welcome us in and give support to whatever we may have to face.

Think about what the Christians had to face during the time that John wrote his first letter. The Christians at that time did not have comfortable churches in which to meet. They didn't have freedom of religion like we take for granted in our country. They had a Roman government that allowed them to worship a little bit, but they were always arresting those Christians for some disturbance. They had the Jewish leaders always watching over them, and finding every way to get them arrested and thrown in jail. The Christians of John's time even had the Roman and Greek pagan religions to contend with, religions that stated that everything is okay. Do whatever you want. Eat, drink, and be happy, for who cares? Such a free-for-all lifestyle was not only destructive but also alluring. Sin has its way of making people feel good, even though they destroy themselves and others.

So John is writing to people who may be under the threat of arrest, of persecution, and of falling farther away from God. So fellowship among those Christians was vital. Fellowship had to become second nature to them, something they could not live without like water or air. John taught them about the *agape* love of God. *Agape* love cannot be arrested. *Agape* love cannot be

stoned or crucified. God's infinite, steady, at-no-cost love is the antidote to a culture that loses itself in meaninglessness.

We have freedom of religion, and we don't have people looking to arrest us. But we do have sin to contend with. We do have disasters that show their ugly faces and take us down. We have moments of decision, in which we don't know what the next move should be, or even how to think straight. We have moments of doubt, in which we have no confidence in ourselves and we fear what might happen next. We have moments of isolation, in which we think we are the only ones suffering, and will it ever stop?

Remember that *agape* love is always flowing. God's love for us has never stopped. Love is never held back from us. Remember what John says in Chapter 4, that God revealed his love, made it real to us, by sending his Son to the world to die for us. He is the Answer to our sin. He is the Rescuer from death. Not that we asked for it. Not that we loved for God to do this for us. God took the first step. God showed his *agape* love to us first, and he has never, ever, stopped giving it.

If we look carefully, we will see God's *agape* love. We will see it especially in our fellowship here, the fellowship that God has set up for each of us to enjoy



and to add to. We will see *agape* love in the people we have come to love. We will see it in the groups of people we trust. Because we have those moments of decision, we know there are people among us to help. Because we have those moments of doubt, we know there are people in our lives who can give a word of inspiration. Because we have moments of isolation, feeling unloving and unloved, we know there are people here to love us, just as we are. And all the others around us are here, because they know we are here, giving back love with our time and talents.

Beloved. Storehouses and distribution centers. The amazing *agape* love of God. The fellowship is afloat here, and it will weather every storm. We agree with Dietrich Bonhoeffer when he said, “[Let the one] who has had the privilege of living a common Christian life with other Christians praise God’s grace from the bottom of his [or her] heart. Let [that person] thank God on his [or her] knees and declare: It is grace, nothing but grace, that we are allowed to live in community with Christian [brothers and sisters].”<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, 5-6.

