

## SESSION SIX: SEX AND LOVE

### Opening Prayer

*Great God of Love, we thank you for blessing us with your love that is shown most fully in the life and death of your son Jesus. Show us how Christ's love can guide us in our relationships with each other and deepen our love for you. Amen.*

### Jumpstart

Before reading what Paul has to say about love, think about what love means to you. Talk about it together, and write down some qualities or descriptions of love on a board or tablet that everyone can see.

### It's About Love

The thirteenth chapter of 1 Corinthians is often read at weddings, so it may be familiar. The passage is as famous for its poetic qualities as for what it says. Paul's use of metaphors and rhythm is so powerful that we may remember phrases without really thinking about what they mean. And because of its association with weddings, we may think Paul is talking about romantic love — complete with kisses, flowers, and puffy dresses. But Paul is not describing some sweet, sappy love that makes us feel butterflies in our stomachs. Instead Paul writes of a vigorous, active love rooted in God's love for us — love that is strong enough to heal deep divisions in a community. This is love with some teeth.

### It's Greek to Me

**agape** (ag-AH-pay) = love, charity

**philia** (fil-EE-ah) = friendship

**eros** (EH-ros) = passion

The word used for “love” in 90% of scripture (including 1 Corinthians 13) is *agape* (verb form *agapao*). *Eros* is not used at all in the Bible, although a comparable Hebrew word is used in the Song of Solomon. *Philia* suggests affection or fondness and can relate to either people or things. It is used several times in the Christian scriptures, including a warning in 1 Timothy 6:10 about the love of money (*philarguria*) and comments about the love Christians should have for one another (*philadelphia*). Second Peter 1:5-7 offers a “ladder” of virtues that starts with faith, leads to mutual affection (*philadelphia*), and ends, finally, with love (*agape*).

*Agape* is a gift from God — a gift that, with faith and hope, is necessary for salvation. These are sometimes referred to as universal gifts, since they are given to all Christians, unlike the spiritual gifts we discussed in Session Five. God's love for us is *agape*: Jesus didn't die because he was fond of us, but because of the depth of divine love. And because God loves us so much, we must love each other. *Agape* is not just something you feel, it's something you do. Consider these passages from scripture that deal with *agape*:

*“As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love.”*

— John 15:9-10

*"[Jesus] said: 'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.' This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.'"*

— Matthew 22:37-39

*"I say to you that listen, love your enemies, do good to those who hate you."*

— Luke 6:27

*"I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord."*

— Romans 8:38-39

### **Discussion Questions**

? Based on these passages, what words would you use to describe *agape*? Add these to the list from the Jumpstart exercise.

### **The Greatest of These**

The thirteenth chapter of 1 Corinthians is an extended discourse in praise of *agape*, which is translated as either "love" or "charity." The chapter is in three clear sections, which we'll look at separately.

### **Read 1 Corinthians 13:1-3**

This section could be summarized as: "If you have everything else but don't have love, the other stuff isn't worth much." Paul describes several spiritual gifts, which are also mentioned in chapter 12 and/or 14: speaking in tongues, prophesying, having miraculous faith, and self-sacrifice. In contrast to the special gifts, love is a universal gift,

necessary for salvation. *Agape* is the spirit in which other gifts should be used. *Agape* should inform everything we do so that whenever we start something new, we should be able to say "I'm doing this out of love."

Paul writes in first person, which accomplishes two things: First it makes his own ministry an example that would mean nothing if he didn't do it out of love. Second, he makes this chapter very personal as well as universal. In the next section, he makes sure that the Corinthians know he is talking about them too, without pointing the finger directly at them. All of us, he says, should ground our actions in love.

### **Discussion Questions**

? How often in your daily life are you aware of doing something out of love for someone or something else?

? The religious practices Paul mentions are all from the ancient church. What kinds of things might we do out of love today?

### **Read 1 Corinthians 13:4-7**

The next section describes some characteristics of love. Paul names two positive aspects — patience and kindness — then lists what love is not. Several of these negative traits are things he accuses the Corinthians of elsewhere in this letter. The chart on the next page outlines Paul's not-so-subtle way of letting these folks know they have failed to treat each other with love.

Paul ends this section by telling us what *agape* does, again stressing that this kind of love isn't just a feeling but an action – it's described not just by adjectives but by verbs: "Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things." (13:7)

<b>What love is not:</b>	<b>What the Corinthians are:</b>
Envious (13:4)	“For as long as there is jealousy and quarreling among you, are you not of the flesh...” (3:3)
Boastful (13:4)	“Your boasting is not a good thing.” (5:6; also see 1:29-31, 3:21, 4:7)
Puffed up, inflated, arrogant (13:4)	“But some of you, thinking that I am not coming to you, have become arrogant...” (4:18; also see 4:6, 4:19, 8:1)
Rude, shameful (13:5)	“If anyone thinks that he is not behaving properly toward his fiancée...” (7:36; also see 5:1-2, 6:12-20, 11:2-16, 11:20-22)
Self-seeking (13:5)	“Do not seek your own advantage, but that of the other.” (10:24)
Joyful about wrongdoing (13:6)	“You yourselves wrong and defraud...” (6:8)

### **Discussion Questions**

? Paul’s image of *agape* gives us a vision of a life filled with love. How much does that vision inspire you in your own life? How do you live out *agape* in the way you love God? In how you love your friends and family?

? In what ways does the church embrace and live out this vision of love? How do you see this vision of God’s reign of love in your church’s preaching? How is it present in your understanding of the sacrament of communion?

? Look at the list you made earlier of qualities or descriptions of love. How does your list compare with Paul’s description? Add anything that Paul mentioned that was not already on your list.

### **Read 1 Corinthians 13:8-13**

The final section of Paul’s argument discusses the enduring quality of *agape*. As we saw earlier in this study, Paul and the early Christians believed that the end of time was right around the corner. Much of Paul’s letter is encouragement

for the Corinthians to remain faithful as they await Christ’s second coming. When that happens, God’s love will be fulfilled and other gifts will no longer be necessary. We won’t need prophecy, tongues, or teaching because God will reveal everything to us. Faith and hope sustain us as we wait for the second coming, but love – *agape* – will continue in the new age (13:13). While Christians wait for this new age, these gifts would also help them remain strong in resisting the influence of the surrounding Roman culture.

### **Discussion Questions**

? Think about the ways you understood the world when you were a child. How do you see things differently now? How do you think our understandings will be different after Christ’s return?

? How would you live differently if you thought the world would end any day?

? How much do faith, hope, and love sustain you during tough times?

## **Exercise Covenant**

A covenant is a sacred commitment between two parties that includes both obligations and promises. God makes several such covenants with the people of Israel, and some of these are accompanied by a sign of some sort. Try to name the parties involved in each one and what they promised before you check the scriptural citation.

- Rainbow (Genesis 9:8-13)
- Circumcision (Genesis 17:2, 9-11)
- The written law (Exodus 19:5-6, 21:1)
- Cup of wine (Mark 14:23-25)

The covenants God makes with humanity should serve as models for how we express our love for each other. It's no accident that the marriage covenant is used to symbolize God's relationship with the people of Israel and Christ's relationship with the church. Relationships — sexual or otherwise — can be most fully experienced within a covenant. Covenant embodies the promise of love that allows us to be open to someone else.

## **What Does it Mean for Us?**

Paul is not talking about romantic love in 1 Corinthians 13 — the context of this chapter is harmony within the church. But because this chapter is read so often at weddings, we associate it with romantic love, and therefore with sexuality. Paul points out that all of our behavior as Christians must be grounded in *agape*, and we can extend that to include our sexual behavior. It may be tempting to become sexually involved when we think we are in love, but Paul reminds us that we have to stop and ask ourselves what kind of love we're dealing with. Is this *eros*, with all its

giddy, queasy wonderful-ness? Is it the warm, fondness of *philia*? Or is it *agape* that calls us to commitment and covenant, first to God, then to each other? As Paul writes, only *agape* endures, so it is on *agape* that covenants should be based.

? How often do you think people have sex because of *agape*? How often is marriage grounded in this kind of love? What happens when it's not?

? How do you recognize *agape*? How do you (or might you) practice *agape* in your own life?

? When love is viewed in the context of community, how does it relate to issues of sexuality, sexism, and embodiment?

? After considering what Paul is addressing in this chapter, what would it mean to read it at a wedding? What are some other occasions in the life of the church at which it could be read?

## **Closing**

Close the group session with prayer for this time of study together, including any issues of praise or concern that group members want to share. Then sing together the first verse of "They Will Know We Are Christians by Our Love."

We are one in the spirit,  
We are one in the Lord,  
We are one in the spirit,  
We are one in the Lord,  
And we pray that our unity  
May one day be restored.  
And they'll know we are Christians  
By our love, by our love,  
Yes they'll know we are Christians  
By our love.

