

## LOVE COVERS

## 1 PETER 4:8; PHILIPPIANS 2:1-4

Happy Valentine's Day everyone! What is love? How do you define it? For years, popular musicians have attempted to answer those questions. Did you know there are over 10,000 songs on file at the U.S. Copyright Office in Washington, D.C., that begin with the words "Love Is ..." Here are some of these song titles from the 20th century that try to define love: "Love Is Like a Dizziness" (1905) "Love Is Like the Influenza" (1927) "Love Is Good for Anything That Ails You" (1936) "Love Is Atomic" (1950) "Love Is Psychedelic" (1968) "Love Is Groovy" (1969) "Love Is a Four-Letter Word" (1975) "Love Is a Five-Letter Word" (1975) "Love Is a Funky Thing" (1976) "Love Is Blindness" (1991). Well, now you know what love is!

Valentine's Day is a celebration of romantic love which is fine. God created romantic love, after all. But today I want you to think with me about the high value God puts on love between fellow Christians. It's wonderful when you see it happen. It's tragic when it's absent. As is true in all human relationships, sometimes spending too much time with one another can strain our love for one another. But that's not been a problem lately due to the pandemic, has it? Hopefully, we're moving back toward being with each other more and more again physically in the near future. When that happens, the need to love each other well at KRBC will once again be front and center. It also occurs to me that in a time of massive change already due to the pandemic, our church will be anticipating even more change soon. As you know, I will retire from pastoral ministry sometime next year. That will result in inevitable change. Change always reveals differences which can result in conflict which requires godly love to handle well.

The Bible says God is love. That means love is an essential part of His character. God can't be God without love. From God's perspective, your life has a specific purpose. It's not to be happy. It's not to be successful. It's not to be self-fulfilled. For followers of Jesus, the purpose of this earthly life is to prepare us for life with Him in eternity. That preparation includes learning how to love like God loves. God desires His kind of love to work its way into our lives and becomes an integral part of our character, too. God utilizes different ways to help us learn and grow into His kind of love. You could think of them as workshops. God's love workshops. One great workshop where we learn how to love like God loves is the home and the family. Another key love workshop for God is the local church. It's there where we encounter people who love and serve Jesus just like we do, but they're different from us. Differences in gender, in age, in life experiences, in ethnicity, in economic and social background, in how we understand Scripture, in what's important to us spiritually – just to name a few. Today, I want you to think with me about how God develops His kind of love in us. Ironically...

### **GODLY LOVE IS DEVELOPED IN CONFLICTS, NOT THEIR ABSENCE.**

Here's a key Bible verse for today: 1 Peter 4:8 (NIV), "Above all, love each other deeply, because love covers over a multitude of sins." Another translation of the same

verse puts it like this, “Most important of all, continue to show deep love for each other, for love covers a multitude of sins.” (NLT) Peter, one of Jesus’ twelve original disciples, wrote a letter to brand new followers of Jesus living in what’s now the country of Turkey. Those words “above all” or “most important of all” tell us clearly what Peter considered of greatest value. Nothing was more vital than to love each other with godly love.

Then, after establishing that love is the greatest priority, he put it in the form of a command: “love each other deeply” or “continue to show deep love for each other.” The original Greek word for “deep” or “deeply” there is an interesting one. It means literally “at full strength.” It was often used to describe a runner stretching herself out to be first across the finish line or a horse straining to win a race. It assumed a lot of energy was being used. A sustained, maximum effort was being made. Great exertion that tested your strength and endurance. What’s the implication? It’s not necessarily easy to practice God’s kind of love. It demands something of you. It can exhaust you - take it out of you. It’s effortful, not effortless. It will stretch you. It may require you to overlook injury or insult. Your love may not be reciprocated. Instead, it may be ignored or even rejected. God loves us like that. And to get you and me to love each other like God loves us is never easy or automatic.

We falsely assume those first Christians had this loving each other stuff nailed down. You know, they lived so much closer in time to when Jesus was here and they had so much more of the Holy Spirit available to them, so loving each other was effortless, right? Wrong! Those early churches had horrendous relationship problems. That’s why we hear Peter and other NT authors so often encouraging, begging, pleading and commanding those first followers of Jesus to love each other. Even more than us, they came from different backgrounds, walks of life, viewpoints and opinions. It was tough sledding learning how to love each other like God loved them.

“Most important of all, continue to show deep love for each other, for love covers a multitude of sins.” (1 Pt. 4:8 NLT) The context of that verse is the interpersonal relationships between Christians. Do you see Peter’s assumption? Christians are going to hurt and wound each other. Sometimes we’re going to sin against each other. Followers of Jesus will experience conflict and disagreement with each other. It’s inevitable because we live in a sinful world and each of us still struggles with sinful behaviors and attitudes in our own lives. Those don’t instantly disappear when your relationship with God is restored by putting your faith in Jesus. Our ongoing struggle with sin is a very real, but uncomfortable fact of life. So when that reality bubbles up to the surface, what then? God’s great answer is love: “continue to show deep love for each other, for love covers a multitude of sins.”

“Love is blind.” I’m sure you’ve heard that old saying. On the contrary, real love for another person is never blind. Instead, real love – God’s kind of love – covers. That’s an interesting way to put it, isn’t it? Love covers. Meaning what? The great Christian leader, Martin Luther, described how it works in a marriage. “It is impossible to keep

peace between man and woman in family life if they do not condone and overlook each other's faults but watch everything to the smallest point. For who does not at times offend? Thus many things must be overlooked; very many things must be ignored that a peaceful relation may exist." True enough. Sometimes to cover means choosing to overlook whenever possible. That principle is true beyond marriage. God's love is able to accept a person just as he is or she is. Acceptance doesn't require approval. It does mean, however, we continue to acknowledge a person's value to God and to us despite their faults, their failures, their foolishness, and even their selfishness, unkindness or thoughtlessness toward us. We maintain the relationship. We keep the hope of a better relationship alive even when it's strained at the moment. Parents learn to do this with their own children. Parental love "covers" over a whole lot, doesn't it? It means you continue to extend love despite a lot of unloving actions and attitudes coming back to you from the child you love so much.

Little Amy unwrapped a beautiful golden-haired doll given to her by her grandmother as a present. Amy squealed with delight, "It's such a pretty doll. Oh, thank you, Grandma!" Amy played with her new doll most of the day. But then she put it down and sought out one of her old dolls. Its hair had come off. Its nose was broken. One eye was gone. An arm and a leg were even missing. But Amy cradled that tattered, dilapidated old doll in her arms. Grandma observed, "Well, it looks as though you like that dolly the best." Amy said, "I like the beautiful new doll you gave me, Grandma. But I love this old doll the most because if I didn't love her, no one else would." I've heard of some people being described as EGRs. What's an EGR? It stands for Extra Grace Required. Some people – even some Christians – require extra grace from us. They need the covering of our love. Come to think of it, you might have been an EGR once yourself. Someone covered you with love until you matured.

That verse tells me godly love is developed in conflicts, not their absence. Most of us have learned along life's journey that problems - including conflicts with other people – can make us better people. If conflict is handled well, it stretches us to grow and mature. After being a pastor in local churches for over 40 years now, I know conflicts between followers of Jesus in the same local church are never easy, never fun, but also inevitable. When they get handled well, it can mean some important spiritual growth for the individuals involved and the church, too. It's easy to assume when conflicts or disagreements emerge in our church - or any church - that the Holy Spirit has left and everyone is a hypocrite. Wrong! Instead, God is presenting us with an opportunity to learn how to love like God loves. Will we develop that kind of love or refuse to do so?

Typically, this church – or any church – will experience conflicts in one of two areas. First, there can be conflicts between people. Some people just naturally annoy each other. Others can be infected with a spirit of criticism – they're just kind of chronically unhappy about most everything. Some people have a natural tendency to be judgmental of other people's beliefs or lifestyle. There are still others who are very quick to take offense and sometimes offense can harden into long term bitterness.

There will be those who just can't seem to believe the best about others or give them the benefit of the doubt when controversial things are said or done.

Second, there can be conflicts over practices. What kind of worship service should we offer? What kind of children's or student ministry should we offer? What kinds of evangelism or outreach should be attempted? Where should our mission dollars go and how much should be given? In the coming months, this church will need to answer this question. What kind of person should be our next Senior Pastor? There might well be disagreement. The list of potential conflicts can be endless, because we all bring different perspectives. Conflicts between people. Conflicts over practices. When those conflicts emerge at KRBC – and they inevitably will from time to time – let's remember God's agenda in allowing the conflict is greater than the conflict itself. He wants to develop His love in us as a church and as individual followers of Jesus. And often that happens in the midst of conflict, not its absence. "Most important of all, continue to show deep love for each other, for love covers a multitude of sins." (1 Pt. 4:8 NLT)

### **GODLY LOVE REQUIRES HARMONY, NOT CONFORMITY.**

Let's read Philippians 2:1-4. The church in the Greek city of Philippi had been founded by Paul. It had a reputation for being a strong, growing, and spiritually mature congregation. But they had their problems – their conflicts – as well. Why else would Paul have written what we just read? The presence of conflict between people got real specific in 4:2 (NLT), "Now I appeal to Euodia and Syntyche. Please, because you belong to the Lord, settle your disagreement." We know nothing about these ladies or their conflict. They were likely influential leaders in the Philippian church. We can assume, however, their conflict was having a really negative impact on the church.

Walk with me through what Paul wrote in 2:1 (NLT). "Is there any encouragement from belonging to Christ? Any comfort from his love? Any fellowship together in the Spirit? Are your hearts tender and compassionate?" I hear something significant in that appeal. There's only one foundation for unity and love among followers of Jesus. It's Jesus alone! In Him, we share a common life experience. We've been born again and indwelt by the same Holy Spirit. We've been adopted into the same spiritual family. God is your Heavenly Father as well as mine. As a result, it's not necessary to have identical perspectives, identical doctrinal beliefs, or identical convictions on what's preferable or better at church, because that's not the foundation of our relationship. After all, God, through the Holy Spirit, has spiritual fellowship with followers of Jesus from a wide variety of different traditions, belief systems, and ways of doing church all over the world in the past, present and future. What binds us together is that we share Jesus, the life of the Holy Spirit, and we've experienced and received God's love.

When we understand that truth, it's really freeing. You don't have to sacrifice your convictions to belong to the Body of Christ, or give up your opinions, or surrender your perspective. The only power that truly brings unity in this or any church is the power of

God's love. Love for Jesus enables us to accept and love those whom God accepts and loves regardless of their opinions, convictions, or beliefs. That means we can still be one spiritual family even if I am wrong or my brothers and sisters in Christ are wrong. Being "right" isn't the foundation of our being in God's family. It's the fact that together we share in Jesus' life. "Then make me truly happy by agreeing wholeheartedly with each other, loving one another, and working together with one mind and purpose." (Ph. 2:2 NLT) That might sound beautifully idealistic, but thoroughly unrealistic to our ears. But I believe Paul was describing not cookie-cutter conformity, but harmony.

Someone's compared the local church working the way God wants it to work to witnessing a symphony orchestra give a performance. Does everyone play the same note in the orchestra? Well, no. But are they playing their own unrelated compositions all at the same time? No, not that either. Instead, they're blowing, scraping, fingering, and banging different notes clearly defined in one musical score under the direction of the conductor. It's not music played in unison – everyone playing the same note. It's a harmony – different notes coming together to create a gorgeous piece of music. If it comes off well, it's because all the participants in the orchestra know their part in the score, submit to the conductor, and appreciate the contributions made by others in the same group. Our score is the Word of God, Christian. Our conductor is the Holy Spirit. And you and the rest of the orchestra are the fellow believers who make up this congregation. When you put all of that together – an actual orchestra or a local church – the result is sweet harmony not conformity. Here's another truth to consider today.

### **GODLY LOVE REQUIRES A RIGHT ATTITUDE, NOT RIGHT OPINIONS.**

"Don't be selfish; don't try to impress others. Be humble, thinking of others as better than yourselves. Don't look out only for your own interests, but take an interest in others, too." (Ph. 2:3-4 NLT) Godly love is developed in conflicts, not their absence. Godly loves requires harmony, not conformity. And those verses remind us that godly loves requires a right attitude, not right opinions. Remember the fight Euodia and Syntyche were having? Paul never mentioned what specifically was causing such a sharp conflict between those two ladies. We know from other NT letters Paul wrote that if the conflict had been over some key truth about Jesus or the Christian faith, he would have addressed it head on. Apparently, then, the conflict between Euodia and Syntyche had to do with personal opinions, or preferences, or perspectives. Paul doesn't even address whose opinions are right or wrong. Instead, he exhorted them to have the right spirit – the right heart attitude – toward one another.

You might remember from our recent study in 1 Corinthians that Paul compared the local church to a human body. Someone is like a foot. Someone else is like a nose. Someone is like a kidney. Someone else is like skin. Just like the parts of the human body, we each have different functions, tasks, and roles in the body of Christ we call the church. But, like the human body, we all take direction from the Head – the brain, so to speak - who is Jesus Himself. When we allow a wrong attitude to exist between

ourselves and others in this church, it's like one part of your body attacking another part of it. Hands and teeth usually get along together when they're part of the same body. Yes, hands have been known to punch out teeth and teeth have been known to bite hands, but not usually in the same body! That's what happens when Christians tolerate a wrong spirit toward one another. We just punch and bite ourselves!

Is it better to be right in your opinions and wrong in your attitude or is it better to be wrong in your opinions and right in your attitude? When our attitude is wrong toward other followers of Jesus, the Holy Spirit is grieved. We Baptists believe strongly in water baptism as an outward sign of an inner spiritual reality. Did you know members of the Friends, also known as the Quakers, abstain from water baptism? God has blest and worked through both groups. Some Pentecostals think Christians who don't speak in tongues are inferior. Some Baptists think Pentecostals are weird and strange. Both attitudes are unfortunate. God has blest and worked through both groups. My point? There's something more important than being correct or being right. Scripture says a right attitude before God and toward other followers of Jesus is more important than right opinions or right beliefs. God blesses and uses people with contradictory opinions, but God never blesses a lack of love. If you're right in your opinions, but wrong in your attitude, you're just completely wrong. Godly love is free to agree or disagree on many matters while at the same time keeping a right spirit toward one another.

I have to admit I've come to admire Fred Rogers more after his death than I ever did when he was alive. I wrote him off as nerdy and sappy, but failed to see the genius and importance of what he conveyed through his long running children's show, "Mister Roger's Neighborhood." Americans seem to love sharing myths about Fred Rogers. Consider the one that speculated he wore those famous sweaters to cover up his tattoos. False! Or the one that he was an ordained Presbyterian minister. That one is true. He graduated from Pittsburgh Theological Seminary in 1963. Fred Rogers was actually a man defined by his Christian faith and the message he taught every day on his show was shaped by it. "You've made this day a special day by just your being you. There is no person in the whole world like you, and I like you just the way you are." His familiar greeting of "Hi, neighbor" and his insistence on being neighborly was based on Jesus' parable of the Good Samaritan. He also said, "I think everybody longs to be loved, and longs to know that he or she is lovable.... When we look for what's best in the person we happen to be with at the moment, we're doing what God does; so in appreciating our neighbor, we're participating in something truly sacred."

Amen, Fred. There's nothing more important than learning how to love like God loves. Godly love is developed in conflict, not its absence. It's about harmony, not conformity. It's about having the right spirit, not the right opinion. One reason this church exists is to learn how to love like God loves. Let's learn how to love together.