

**Good Shepherd Lutheran Church  
Watertown, WI**

**“Love Never Ends”**

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1 Cor. 13

So, what’s on your bucket list? Learning a new hobby like woodworking or painting? Eating just once at a Michelin 3-star restaurant? Skydiving? Driving a Shelby Mustang on Hwy 1?

About 2000 years ago, those Christians in Corinth had their own bucket list. More than anything, they wanted to speak in tongues. They wanted prophetic powers, and deep wisdom. They wanted a faith that could move mountains.

The Apostle Paul has a bucket list too: but he’s mostly concerned about just one thing: love. Not any old kind of love. No, this love is different. He uses an unusual word for it; not eros, the word for romantic love or erotic love. Not philia, the word for brotherly love, as in Philadelphia, city of brotherly love. He uses a word for love that gives itself away, even gives life away. It’s the unique love of God. The word is agape.

In America, our understanding of love is a different animal. It’s largely a romantic infatuation. That love does not and cannot last. Those romcoms on Netflix don’t go much beyond the wedding, because romantic infatuation is fine and fun and entertaining as far as it goes, but it doesn’t go very far. We need something much, much greater and more durable.

Paul uses a list of descriptors to help us imagine what agape is all about. “Agape is patient and kind, agape does not envy or boast; it is not arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful. It takes no pleasure in other peoples’ faults. It is always ready to excuse and forgive, to trust, to hope, and to endure. Agape never ends.”

Clearly this agape is other-worldly. I see glimpses of it in people I know. In the husband who keeps visiting his wife in the memory care unit, though the experience can be painful. In the mother who loves her son, though he steals from her to support his drug habits. In the nurse who keeps giving the best care she can to a grump who is neither grateful nor agreeable nor helpful. I see glimpses of it, but I don’t know of anyone who has reached these high plateaus and remained there. The gravity of human nature keeps pulling us back down. Clearly this love is God’s domain. 1 John simply says, “God is agape” (4:8), which means God’s heart is absolutely open and all the energy is flowing outward, expanding from him. It’s energy that is more interested in the welfare of others than self. It serves. It gives. It sacrifices. It even dies for others. “God so agaped the world that he gave his only Son.” Jesus so loves you that you that he laid his life down for you, for your forgiveness and for your salvation.

Conversely, love as our culture defines it, is not directed outward like that. The energy of love in our culture sucks back inward. It’s a “what’s in it for me” sort of arrangement, a quid pro quo agreement. You scratch my back and I’ll scratch yours. It’s not so much about sacrificing and serving; it’s more about infatuation and unspoken contracts.

When the energy sucks inward like that, sooner or later it breaks down and it all becomes about who did me wrong, and why that person annoys me so, and how he never talks to me anymore, and why she can be so demanding. To make matters worse the nature of our brains is to hold onto these negative thoughts like Velcro, and let the positive thoughts slip off like Teflon. If you don't fight against that, by the last third of life, negativity is all you have left. Even in the church, I've seen way too many grumpy old men and hateful old women because of the inability to love. They practiced very little agape.

To love as God loves we must choose to do so. It's a discipline. We cannot rely on feelings, because by nature we are much more at home with irritability than we are with agape. To love as God loves, whether your spouse, children, neighbors or even your enemies . . . it's an outward flow of energy, because of the needs of others. It's never dependent on the whims of feelings. In fact, the Bible isn't much interested in love as a feeling. In the Bible, love is something you do, selflessly. In the Bible, love isn't inspired by another person being so loveable. It's inspired by an awareness of the needs of others, and it's inspired by Jesus, who emptied himself and sacrificed himself for the loveless so that we might live eternally.

The world is perishing for lack of love. Our nation is perishing for lack of love. It needs agape. Your spouse needs agape. Your children need agape. Your coworkers need agape. Those in the political party opposite of your own need agape. Those protestors and rioters may need the strong arm of the law, but they also need agape. The drug peddler may need to be locked up, but he also needs agape. The mother who chronically neglects her children may need to have her children removed from her, but she also needs agape. Your enemy needs agape. Heap it on his head like burning coals, and maybe he won't be your enemy anymore.

Love one another as Jesus has loved you. Give your love away to those who don't deserve it, to those who may not even be able to say "thank you" for it. Give it away nonetheless, without condition or expectation of reward. Give it away to those who cannot return it. Work to live in love, to develop a generosity of spirit, an outward flow, a readiness to smile, a willingness to serve. That's love that never ends. It's the love of God for you.

Long after romantic infatuation has disappeared, "Love is still patient and kind; love does not envy or boast; it is not arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful . . . Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. This love, this agape never ends." Thanks be to God. Amen.