

## Connection Church Series- First Things First

### Week 4: First Love

Look at all those adorable photos! So many great pictures and great memories, I'm sure! If you caught a glimpse of our photo in there, that was from high school homecoming, circa 2005, my senior year and Pastor David's junior year. Like many of you, we looked like babies-and really we were!

If this is your first Sunday with us, you may be pretty confused right about now. So, to get us all on track, we are in the middle of a sermon series called "First Things First." It is the first sermon series that Pastor David is leading us through as we all go through this transitional season so that we can remember what things should be first in our lives. So we started with week 1 talking about our First Steps. We then talked about our First Call and we had the opportunity to share a little bit of our call stories with you that brought us to this point in time. Lastly, last week, Pastor David preached about what our First Priority should be. So this week, we're talking about our First Love. So those photos should make more sense now!

Also, in case you are also new around here, my name is Emily Layser, and I am the new Director of Spiritual Formation and Congregational Care. I'm married to Pastor David and I'm just starting my ordination journey to become ordained as a deacon in the Global Methodist Church. It is exciting and terrifying all at the same time, and I am so grateful for all of your prayers and support so far!

I am super excited to share what God has put on my heart this week as we dig into the word today and really see what it means to have Jesus be our First Love.

Let's pray and we'll dive in!

(Prayer)

Love...what a (mostly) wonderful, lovely thing. What comes to mind when you think about love? What feelings or thoughts surface when you hear this powerful word?

What is so unique about Love is that it is one thing that all of us have experienced at least once in our life, and hopefully more!

Love is universal. The ability to feel and express love is a fundamental human experience shared by all people, regardless of your culture, background, age, education, or belief system.

Love exceeds geographical boundaries, language barriers, time, space and distance. It is a deep connection, providing a sense of shared humanity.

Maybe that's why google says that there are over 100 million songs that have been written about love. A quick search found that love is such a prevalent theme in music that some studies indicate that roughly 67% of lyrics across different decades focus on love. Maybe you're even humming one of your favorite ones right now!

But what IS love? Like deep down, broken down to the purest and simplest form, what is it?

The dictionary defines love as both a noun and a verb- **an intense feeling of deep affection or a great interest and pleasure in something**. Upon further digging, I found a more indepth definition which says that love is a "complex emotion, characterized by deep affection, care, and commitment to another person or thing."

And this is where it gets a little confusing. By that definition of love, I can say that I LOVE my husband. I LOVE tacos. I LOVE my kids. I REALLY LOVE coffee. But none of these things are actually equal in my heart and my life and the word LOVE in these sentences carries a different weight with each thing I am professing to love.

Maybe instead of asking what love is, a better question to ask is: WHO are we letting define it?

So what does the Bible say about love?

Many of you are probably familiar with the "Love Chapter," read often at weddings. 1 Cor. 13 describes love in detail, with verses 4-8 saying,

*"Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It does not dishonor others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. Love never fails..."*

If you ask me, this is a much better definition of what love is and also what love is not.

These verses show us love in action. Love as a verb. It's also clear from these verses that **love is more than a feeling, it is a choice.**

To better understand Love even more, the Bible actually defines 4 different types of love, when you look at the word love in its Greek form.

1. **Philon Love:** This love is brotherly love and friendship. It is a love built on shared values, companionship, and mutual respect. An example of this would be when Jesus weeps because of his love for Lazarus.
2. **Storge Love:** this is a natural affection found within families, like love between siblings or parents and children. It's often expressed as a bond of loyalty and care that develops within a family unit. An example of this is in Titus, when the author shares how older women should be mentoring younger women in how to better love their families.
3. **Eros Love:** this is the type of love that refers to romantic and passionate love and is most often associated with physical attraction and intimacy within a marriage. Among other places, this type of love is woven throughout the book of Song of Solomon.
4. **Agape Love:** This is the highest form of love, described as selfless, sacrificial, and unconditional. It is associated with God's love for humanity and is considered the foundation for Christian love. Agape is a love that is not based on feelings or emotions, but on a commitment to the well-being of others. This is the kind of love that is most often found in the Bible.

Understanding these different types of love can really help us to grasp what the Bible is really saying about love as we read different scriptures. Pretty neat, right?

Understanding these different facets of love can also help us to live our love out loud in our everyday normal lives. Each day, we have a choice to love one another the way that Jesus loves us.

So what did Jesus say when He was questioned about love?

In Matthew 22:37-38, we see that the Pharisees are trying to trick Jesus. They're asking Him which commandment is the greatest in the law of Moses. Jesus replies to them by saying,

*"You must love the LORD your God with all your heart, all your soul, and all your mind.' This is the first and greatest commandment."*

Jesus doesn't define what love is here, but He aligns what love is here. He tells us where our love should be directed.

**Love God with all you are. That's it.**

Now, He is quoting this out of the book of Deuteronomy, which was a part of their shema, the central Jewish prayer and confession of faith. Even Jesus' response here

gives us insight and highlights that true faith is rooted in a loving relationship with God and not just a legalistic observance, like so many Pharisees were concerned with.

Jesus makes it so simple, and yet we as humans have continued to over complicate it so horribly for centuries.

God IS our First Love. He not only IS our First Love, He WANTS to be our First Love.

Afterall, this is the FIRST commandment. If you go back to the book of Exodus, when Moses is getting the 10 Commandments and he brings them to the Israelites, God states from the very beginning that we should have no other Gods before Him.

So church today, as we dive into this, right here and right now, I need to ask you if you know this. Do you KNOW that God is your First Love?

We might know it, but do we KNOW it? We might have head knowledge of this, but do we have the heart knowledge of this?

Is God your First Love? Is He at the center of everything you do? Does His love flow from you outward to others, in that Agape love way? Is He First in your heart?

Or have you allowed other things to come into your heart before Him? Have you chosen other things over Him? Have other things gotten in the way and pushed Him out, taken His place. Are you struggling to love others because you're doing it all on your own strength?

**In a world that wants to distract, divide and dishearten us, we need to keep God as our First Love.**

Because what happens when we don't?

A great example we can learn from is the church in Ephesus. When Paul first visited the city of Ephesus in Acts 19 and 20, they were taught about Jesus and his love and they received it wholeheartedly.

We know that Paul visited Ephesus enduring his Third Missionary Journey and spent about 3 years there preaching, teaching, and raising up leaders in the faith. If you read Acts 19 and 20, you can get a sense of the zeal and commitment the people had there. It was in Ephesus that God gave Paul the power to heal people and belief in Jesus spread so quickly that it even says "a solemn fear descended on the city and the name of the lord Jesus was greatly honored." (19:17) These people heard about Jesus and his love and they were all in.

We also know that when Paul left the church in Ephesus at the end of his 3 years there, he met with and encouraged the church leaders to continue spreading the good news and to be vigilant. He reminded them to “feed and shepherd God’s flock” (20:28) before praying and leaving them in a tearful good-bye.

Like I said, they understood this love. And it’s evident because the church grew in Ephesus and many came to know Jesus.

A few years later, Paul writes a letter to the church in Ephesus-we now know this as the book of Ephesians. And in his letter to them, he comments on their strong love and faith in Ephesians 1: 15-17-

*“Ever since I first heard of your strong faith in the Lord Jesus and your love for God’s people everywhere, I have not stopped thanking God for you. I pray for you constantly, asking God, the glorious Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, to give you spiritual wisdom and insight so that you might grow in your knowledge of God.”*

Wow! For Paul to commend these people for their strong faith and to say that these people are loving God’s people everywhere- they must have been really making a mark!

They were continuing to do the exact work that Paul had encouraged them to do when he visited there. Paul recollects later in chapter 2 how God loved them so much that even though they were dead in their sin, He saved them by His grace and now they can do the good things God has planned for them to do. To continue to spread the word and love clothes.

The people of Ephesus understood. **Love God, Love Others.**

Until they didn’t.

I don’t know how much you know about the book of Revelation and it has always fascinated me for sure. The book of Revelation contains (among a lot of other things) 7 different letters to 7 different churches. Each letter contains a prophetic word specifically written to each church. So what is there to be said to the Church in Ephesus? The answer may surprise you.

Revelation 2 starts like this, let’s start at verse 2:

*“I know all the things you do. I have seen your hard work and your patient endurance. I know you don’t tolerate evil people. You have examined the claims of those who say they are apostles but are not. You have discovered they are liars. You have patiently suffered for me without quitting.”*

Let's pause there. That sounds pretty good. They are still working hard and are committed to doctrine and discipline. They are patient and suffering for their faith.

Yet it's what is said next that hits like a gut punch. Let's pick up at verse 4:

*"But I have this complaint against you. You don't love me or each other as you did at first! Look how far you have fallen! Turn back to me and do the works you did at first. If you don't repent, I will come and remove your lampstand from its place among the churches."*

Ouch. "You don't love me or each other as you did at first!"

What do those verses in 1 Corinthians say again? We read the second part of the Love chapter earlier, but here's how it starts out. 1 Corinthians 13: 1-3-

*"If I could speak all the languages of earth and of angels, but didn't love others, I would only be a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. If I had the gift of prophecy, and if I understood all of God's secret plans and possessed all knowledge, and if I had such faith that I could move mountains, but didn't love others, I would be nothing. If I gave everything I have to the poor and even sacrificed my body, I could boast about it; but if I didn't love others, I would have gained nothing."*

Kind, obedient, even faithful actions without love are empty.

The people from the church in Ephesus were doing all of the right things. But without keeping their Love for God at the center, they missed the whole point. What once was a church noted for their love of God and others, had lost their way. Their focus had shifted from a passionate relationship with Jesus to a faded performance-based faith.

Do we see this happening in our churches today? Do we see this happening in us?

How many times are we just going through the motions? Empty rituals, meaningless traditions. How often do we find ourselves doing the good things like serving the poor or feeding the hungry, donating money to a good cause... but not out of a place of love for God and others, but out of a place of duty, or privilege or self-righteousness?

Think about it this way: Let's say that I just really want a beautiful bouquet of flowers. So I go to my husband and I express this desire. And then everyday for a week, when he comes home from work, I remind him that I'd really like a bouquet of flowers. Day

after day I ask and I remind him and then on Friday afternoon, when he comes home from work, he walks in the door with the most beautiful bouquet of flowers I have ever seen. Would I love them? Yes! It's what I asked for. It's what I wanted.

But what about this- what if I was just going about my week, with my meetings and busy schedule and my managing of the house and the kids and everything else and then one day, out of the blue, not on an anniversary or birthday, David walks in the door with a bouquet of flowers. What would my response be then? Would I love these more? Of course! Because he is bringing the flowers home not because I wanted him to but because he wanted to.

It's the same with loving Jesus. Are we loving Him out of a sense of duty and expectation? Or are we loving him out of a place of passion and fervency for Him?

Because Revelation 2:5 has the consequence

***"Turn back to me and do the works you did at first. If you don't repent, I will come and remove your lampstand from its place among the churches."***

Church, we must remember our First Love!

We must keep Him at the center of who we are and everything we do. Because without it, we risk losing the Lord's presence and favor. We risk being able to be a valid representative of God's light and truth in this dark and hurting world.

God has certainly called us to do his will and to do all the good things across the world. And He wants us to do them. But if we don't do them from a place of Love then why are we doing them at all?

What I discovered this week that I just think is so cool is that the love spoken about in 1 Corinthians 13, the love chapter, and the love spoken about in Revelation 2 is the exact same kind of love. Agape Love. That love for God and then the outpouring love for others from our Love of Him.

But maybe you are sitting here today, or you're watching online and you're just not feeling the love. Maybe you once had that love, that passion, that excitement in your faith and yet it's faded over the years and you've forgotten it. And everyday that choice to love and keep God central becomes harder and harder to choose.

Or maybe you're in a place right now where you have heard that God loves you, but loving Him back is just really, really difficult. Maybe you have been hurt one too many times by people who have loved you, and so you have hardened your heart and don't want to let anyone in or love anyone else any more.

If that's you today then we have some really good news. It's not too late. You can rekindle that love you once had. You can come to Jesus and allow your self to love Him because He is the only one who will never let you down!

If that's you today, and you need someone to pray with you, the altar is open and we are here to pray with you and help you to connect with Jesus and this new life that He offers. This FREE LOVE for everyone.

I want to leave you with this last question to ask yourself:

**Is Jesus my first love and am I living in such a way that it's obvious to those around me?**

When people see our passion for Jesus, it makes them want what we have. When we can have patience in a world of hurry or peace in a world of chaos, they notice and they want it.

**The most infectious and impactful ministry you can do isn't something you do at all. It's simply just being in love with Jesus and letting everything else flow from there.**

Let's pray.