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No Lectures, No Lessons, No Language -- just love."

Luke 15:21-32

I'm SO thankful that my 90-year-old grandmother also known as Nonna is still with us today. **I LOVE** going to Nonna's house (pause), **it reminds me so much of my childhood!** I remember when I was just a little boy I went running inside excited to receive a precious embrace from Nonna! As usual, she was right in front of the refrigerator because Nonna was always cooking. You haven't had baccala until you've tasted Nonna's baccala. As she was hugging me I looked over at her refrigerator and noticed what seemed like thousands of pictures all over the doors.

I asked Nonna, "Why do you have so many photos on your fridge?" She replied: "These are the people I love most and every day I know I'm going to open the refrigerator which means I will be reminded of each of them." This morning friends, if nothing else, you should leave this church knowing whole-heartedly that if God had a refrigerator, **your** picture would be on it!

EVERY **SINGLE** DAY God sees you. Not only does He notice you but He also wants to know **you!** And the greatest way for God to connect to your heart is, **LOVE**. And truth be told, in our English language, Love is often a word that gets over used. So, over the next **3 weeks** we will break down the different meanings of LOVE. The Greeks had specific words to describe what we call love. Today we will focus on Agape (unconditional love) next week Eros, (romantic love), and finish with Phileo, (Brotherly/sisterly love, friendship) on April 22.

Friends, **LOVE** is the **BACKBONE of ALL RELATIONSHIPS!** (Pause) This morning, Agape love **is** accessible! And the example set before us is the relationship between the Heavenly Father and his Son, Jesus Christ. Jesus said this when he prayed, in the gospel of John chapter 17 verse 26, "I (Jesus) have made you (God the Father) known to them, and will continue to make you known in order that the love you have for me may be in them and I myself may be in them." The Father had Agape love for his son. It is also the love that the Son (Jesus Christ) has for us which we are **CALLED** to share with others (pause). Church, the central message of Easter, which we celebrated last week is that "**Jesus Got Up!**" The resurrection **is** the anchor of our entire Christian faith.

Theologian, C.S. Lewis says this: "I believe in Christianity as I believe that the sun (in the sky) has risen: not only because I see it, but because by it I see everything else."

God's unconditional LOVE removes our innate desire of selfishness so we can be of use to others. Jesus Overcoming death, leaving you and me with the Holy Spirit is for a specific reason friends **and it's simple!!! Jesus died and rose SO THAT WE COULD LIVE!** Do you know how many people spend the majority of their lives telling the same story of defeat **OVER AND OVER AND OVER AGAIN?** (PAUSE) Year after year

marinating themselves in isolation and pain yet refuse to accept a different way of life... The life Jesus Christ wants for you is designed for purpose NOT **persecution!**

And the invitation Christ gives us on how to live is powerful and **radical**: He wants us to give **God's** love away freely to others... This has **NOTHING** to do with **worldly status** and **EVERYTHING** to do with the heartbeat in your chest. Your true identity is rooted in Sharing God's love with the world. **News flash!** Your ultimate purpose **if** you are professing **to follow Jesus Christ is to LOVE** (Pause). God's agape love, however, is a **VERY** different kind of love than human love (pause)

What does God's unconditional love in comparison to our human love look like? Here are some practical examples of the differences between human love and God's agape love:

| Characteristics of human Love | Characteristics of God's Love |
|---|--|
| It is selfish and gain based | Sacrificial |
| It has strings and expects something in return | No strings attached |
| It is conditional | It is unconditional |
| It is sensual | Spiritual |
| Gives to get | Gives to be a blessing |
| Could be offended and may stop when not appreciated | Continues against all odds |
| Go to limited length to help other | Go to every length possible to help others |

Our human love is limited to natural abilities but with God's love you will surpass your human ability. We see this LOUD AND CLEAR in today's parable lesson.

What a different kind of story we read together this morning from our Holy Bible... (Pause) This prodigal son completely disrespected his father. As a Jewish man to spend your inheritance and leave your land was the highest level of betrayal. **Yet despite this blatant disrespect** the loving father of this parable who portrays the heart of the loving Heavenly Father welcomes this lost boy back home!!!

What courage, honor and humility we see through the eyes of this prodigal dad in today's Scripture. A parent, who like most parents, loves their children with all their heart. This is AGAPE LOVE!!! Powerful, **powerful truth.** (Pause) **This is exactly why understanding the difference between the flesh (our humanness) and God's Spirit is so important when it comes to loving unconditionally!!**

The Apostle Paul, who was just like you and me -- gives such clarity to why understanding the difference between the two is vital. In Romans 8:6 He says: "The mind governed by the flesh is death, but the mind governed by the Spirit is life and peace." What does that mean? The flesh is death but the Spirit is life and peace...

It means that life **is** going to throw you a curve ball and that times **will** get hard. The example you set and how you respond determines whether or not you are in the flesh or in the spirit! Anger, resentment, fear, hatred, anxiety, arrogance, bitterness, and insecurities -- these emotions serve the flesh! The flesh is Death? It means being consumed by your own negative thoughts and behaviors. It is **SO** difficult to locate any form of love from this platform... To live a life consumed by resentments, fear and worry is **absolutely exhausting**... But God is masterful at telling new stories. A story of: Hope, faith, forgiveness, compassion, humility, grace and Gratitude – these emotions serve the Spirit of God! No one has to live in the prison of negativity – **EVERYONE** can choose life and peace even when it seems impossible to do so...

You know they say that one of the greatest gifts in life is having a child. Parents really have an understanding of (AGAPE) love. This has become abundantly clear to me since November 18 of last year when Arianna Grace Morello was born. While my love for her has no limitations something also happened to me the day she was born. The way I felt and thought about **my own** parents changed FOREVER! I called my mom and dad at least 20 times after Ari's birth because it finally made sense. **It finally made sense** why they did everything they did for me even when I was living out the life style of the younger prodigal son. If my parents feel this way about me, if I feel this way about Arianna, than could you imagine what **God feels about us!!!** Now I know, the greatest influence in a young persons life -- is the influence of their parents. (PAUSE)

But here's the thing... The world ... **OUR WORLD** ... is changed by your example, **NOT** by your opinion (repeat). **We a have a BEAUTIFUL lesson to take in this morning from the parable of The Prodigal Father by Jesus? (PAUSE)**

His message to us is that Gratitude **IS NOT** an emotion or a feeling **BUT** rather it is a choice... Meaning in life, we don't have to operate from our feelings all the time because feelings aren't facts. We can actually become **responsive** to spiritual principles like Gratitude rather than be **reactive** to character defects like anger even when we have every right to lash out at something or someone. **What an invitation we are given...** The chance to operate from our spiritual core, which leads us to peace, freedom and joy.

Gratitude, it is a choice! SO is giving away freely, Agape Love.

And please, don't get me wrong Agape love is a challenge for us human beings there is no doubt about it -- but love is **the greatest gift our world** will ever know. In closing, listen carefully to this beautiful story about an Empty Box by an 11-year old child named Mark: Mark was an 11 year old orphan who lived with his aunt, a bitter middle aged woman greatly annoyed with the burden of caring for her dead sister's son. She never failed to remind young Mark, if it hadn't been for her generosity, he would be a vagrant, homeless waif. Still, with all the scolding and chilliness at home, he was a sweet and gentle child.

Mark's schoolteacher had not noticed him particularly until he began staying after class each day (at the risk of arousing his aunt's anger, she later found) to help her straighten up the room. They did this quietly and comfortably, not speaking much, but enjoying the solitude of that hour of the day.

When they did talk, Mark spoke mostly of his mother. Though he was quite small when she died, he remembered a kind, gentle, loving woman, who always spent much time with him.

As Christmas drew near however, Mark failed to stay after school each day. His teacher looked forward to his coming, and when the days passed and he continued to scamper hurriedly from the room after class, she stopped him one afternoon and asked why he no longer helped her in the room. She told him how she had missed him, and his large gray eyes lit up eagerly as he replied, "Did you really miss me?"

Mark's teacher explained how he had been her best helper. "I was making you a surprise," he whispered confidentially. "It's for Christmas." With that, he became embarrassed and dashed from the room. He didn't stay after school any more after that. Finally came the last school day before Christmas. Mark crept slowly into the room late that afternoon with his hands concealing something behind his back. "I have your present," he said timidly when his teacher looked up. "I hope you like it." He held out his hands, and there lying in his small palms was a tiny wooden box.

"It's beautiful, Mark. Is there something in it?" I asked opening the top to look inside "Oh you can't see what's in it," he replied, "and you can't touch it, or taste it or feel it, but mother always said it makes you feel good all the time, warm on cold nights, and safe when you're all alone."

I gazed into the empty box. "What is it Mark," I asked gently, "that will make me feel so good?"

"It's **love**," he whispered softly, "and mother always said it's best when you give it away." And he turned and quietly left the room.

What we can learn from our children...

Unconditional love, agape love, will not be swayed by time or circumstances. Please... for God, our community and our children. Lets never forget that...

Agape love doesn't keep score. It doesn't matter how people react; if you want to love like Jesus loves, you have to put yourself aside. The prodigal father did exactly that... He loved with open arms just like Jesus does.

Every human life across the globe -- will at some point in their life need this type of Love...

Unconditional love!!! No Lectures, No Lessons, No Language -- just love...

May it be so, Amen.

"Let us gather our gifts together and bring them to God as an offering of gratitude and praise!"

Sources: <http://christiancommunitychurcharlow.hdpm.org/the-differences-between-human-love-and-gods-love/>

<http://storiesforpreaching.com/>