
Becoming an Agapic Church



Message by Pastor Tom, Interim Lead Pastor
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Scripture Passage 1 John 4:7-21
Vancouver Chinese Baptist Church Vancouver, Canada



I have come to appreciate you deeply as a congregation, more than I can tell you. I thank God for you. This morning I seek to speak to you from my heart and well as my head, and I ask you to listen with all your heart as well as your head.

We know that church attendance in our city is low. I hear figures such as 2%. The general attitude of many people is one of apathy. Going to the mall has replaced going to church. For some people going to Costco is almost a spiritual experience.

I think every day I lie awake at night asking, What kind of church will be able to transform the spiritual geography our lovely city, and change the eternal destiny of thousands and thousands of people?

There needs to be nothing short of a revolution of the heart. This revolution will not come from cute slogans, better promotion, slick advertising. People do not need more programs. They do not need more activities. More than anything, they are looking for a people and a place where they can be loved.

The people don't have to be super-spiritual (in fact, it would actually be better if they were not! Because that usually scares

people off). They don't have to pretend as though they have it all together because honestly none of us have it altogether. They simply need to be honest and real, accepting, forgiving and above all, they really need to love one another.

I'd like you to think deeply about this for the next 30 minutes or so and as I asked, listen with your heart.

There are some passages in the Scriptures that really are so profound and beautiful, that sermons, no matter how articulate they might be, simply cannot add to their meaning. The best we can hope for is that our stumbling words and clumsy explanations do not take away from their depth or diminish their beauty.

This is the case in 1st John 4:7, 21. Almost anything we say will feel clumsy and inadequate.

7 Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God. 8 Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love. 9 This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him. 10 This is love: not that we loved God, but

that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins. 11 Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. 12 No one has ever seen God; but if we love one another, God lives in us and his love is made complete in us.

13 This is how we know that we live in him and he in us: He has given us of his Spirit. 14 And we have seen and testify that the Father has sent his Son to be the Savior of the world. 15 If anyone acknowledges that Jesus is the Son of God, God lives in them and they in God. 16 And so we know and rely on the love God has for us.

God is love. Whoever lives in love lives in God, and God in them. 17 This is how love is made complete among us so that we will have confidence on the day of judgment: In this world we are like Jesus. 18 There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear, because fear has to do with punishment. The one who fears is not made perfect in love.

19 We love because he first loved us. 20 Whoever claims to love God yet hates a brother or sister is a liar. For whoever does not love their brother and sister, whom they have

seen, cannot love God, whom they have not seen. 21 And he has given us this command: Anyone who loves God must also love their brother and sister.

This unique word for love, agape, is used some 28 times in this chapter. It makes me think that God is calling us to build an agapic church [I made up the word] – one that operates and works in love.

Cross references:

- A. 1 John 4:7 : S 1Jn 3:11
- B. 1 John 4:7 : S Jn 1:13
- C. 1 John 4:7 : S 1Jn 2:4
- D. 1 John 4:8 : ver 7, 16
- E. 1 John 4:9 : Jn 1:18
- F. 1 John 4:9 : Jn 3:16, 17; 1Jn 5:11
- G. 1 John 4:10 : Ro 5:8, 10
- H. 1 John 4:10 : S Ro 3:25
- I. 1 John 4:11 : S 1Co 10:14
- J. 1 John 4:11 : S Jn 3:16
- K. 1 John 4:11 : Jn 15:12; S 1Jn 3:11
- L. 1 John 4:12 : S Jn 1:18
- M. 1 John 4:12 : ver 17; 1Jn 2:5
- N. 1 John 4:13 : S 1Jn 2:3
- O. 1 John 4:13 : 1Jn 3:24

- P. 1 John 4:14 : S Jn 15:27
- Q. 1 John 4:14 : S Lk 2:11; S Jn 3:17
- R. 1 John 4:15 : S 1Jn 2:23; 5:5
- S. 1 John 4:15 : 1Jn 3:24
- T. 1 John 4:16 : ver 8
- U. 1 John 4:16 : ver 12, 13; 1Jn 3:24
- V. 1 John 4:17 : ver 12; 1Jn 2:5
- W. 1 John 4:17 : S Eph 3:12
- X. 1 John 4:17 : S Mt 10:15
- Y. 1 John 4:18 : Ro 8:15
- Z. 1 John 4:19 : ver 10
- AA. 1 John 4:20 : S 1Jn 2:9
- BB. 1 John 4:20 : S 1Jn 1:6; 2:4
- CC. 1 John 4:20 : 1Jn 3:17
- DD. 1 John 4:20 : ver 12; S Jn 1:18
- EE. 1 John 4:21 : 1Jn 2:7
- FF. 1 John 4:21 : S Mt 5:43; S 1Jn 2:9

Remember what Jesus said one day in a room to a group of his followers in the shadow of the cross.

34 "A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another.

35 By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another."

Jesus says that God has given the world the right to look at the church, at VCBC, and come to a conclusion about the authenticity of their belief and faith. God says to the city of Vancouver, I am giving you permission to look at the church and on the basis of what you see, you can judge whether or not they are really my followers.

The criteria is not how high raise their hands, how they dress, or what they believe about spiritual gifts, or what their worship music is like, whether it is traditional or whether they sing off the wall, nor how they organize as a church. The criteria, the standard, the measuring stick is simply this, how well they do in the area of loving each other.

We could brainstorm a dozen different programs and ways to have more people come to Christ. We could create a dozen more activities for people, design creative brochures to invite them, create new styles of worship, some of these ideas might work and some of them might not.

But God lays a way right before us to transform a church, to transform a city. It is simply this, we have to grow in loving one another.

But a lot of what we often call love, what we sing about love, not really love at all. It is soft sentiment, or a fuzzy feeling, but is not agape love.

I don't think it is hard to love one another in the kind of way Jesus talks about. Frankly, I think it is impossible.

If we are honest, the human heart has a pretty small gas tank, and when we try to go too many miles, we quickly run out of love pretty fast, and we end up running on empty. Where do we start, where does it begin? Let me invite you to walk with me through this scripture/ passage.

The heart of the passage lies in the fact that everything to do with love begins with God. We are reminded that God is love. The passage says, this is how God loved us – He first loved us.

The origin of love, like the meaning of life, starts outside of ourselves. It begins in the nature and essence of God.

John simply says, **GOD IS LOVE**. When we slow down and stop to think and meditate about that, we are stilled in a moment of realisation about how He acts and feels towards everything.

When we look into his heart, what we see is **LOVE**. We see that all of God's activity is always activity done in love.

When he creates, he creates in love.

When he rules, he rules in love.

When he judges, he judges in love.

When he disciplines, he disciplines in love.

When he provides, he provides in love.

He cannot do anything else, because love is his nature.

Jesus knew the secret of how to love people. He says to his disciples in John 15, as the Father loves me, so I love you.

"As the Father loves me", this was what he knew and understood. Jesus never operated independently of the Father. His food = strength/ stamina was to do the Father's will. He simply lived under the umbrella of the Father's love, and as he knew that the Father loved him, and so his love for others was the reproduction of the love of the Father.

Have you ever been to a wedding reception in one of those fancy hotels where they have a fountain made up of wine glasses, all carefully stacked, and as the wine or champagne flows from the top, each row of glasses fill up and overflow to the next row?

So the love of the Father flows into the Son. It overflows from him into the hearts of the disciples, from them it pours down into each of us.

When we find ourselves genuinely hungry for the work of God in our lives, the place to begin is to move from shallow sentimentalism about love, into the depths of the heart of the Father for us.

John says to us, this is how God showed his love towards us, he sent his son into the world to be an atoning sacrifice for our sins.

God has made visible his love towards us in the ultimate way in the cross. The cross is where God set the price of his holiness. He set it high, way high, and it is also where he paid the bill. The cross is where we lay down our pride. The cross is where we give up our ego. The cross is where we give up the need to be right.

The cross is where we lay down our excuses, leave behind our explanations and abandon our defensiveness, we give up our side of the story, we surrender our pride and we yield our arrogance.

So if we truly want to love someone, we need to visit the cross just by ourselves, and once again lay down our pride, give up the need to be right, to let go of our own junk. That is not

easy for most of us, but this is what we do at the cross, and that is why the cross is always the starting place both to be loved by God, and also to love others.

The only person we can ever change in life is ourselves, and the heart-change we need the most is to be embraced by and immersed in the love of the Father.

As the father loves me...

So I can love you.

Love always works in relationships. That's why John says (verse 20) if we cannot say we love God but at the same time, hate our brother, love always works in relationships.

So what would life in an agapic church look like? John gives us some hints, some clues, not the complete picture, but more than enough to challenge us.

AN AGAPIC CHURCH ALWAYS FINDS PRACTICAL WAYS TO LOVE.

(verse 7) dear friends let us love one another for love comes from God.

1st John 3:18

Dear children, let us not love with words or tongue but with actions and in truth.

One of the basic ways we can communicate love is to tell, to find words to communicate how we feel. Children graduate from school, you are proud of them, did you tell them that?

God uses words to communicate love. At the baptism of his son, the heavens opened. This is my beloved son in whom I am well pleased. It is God saying that he was proud as he watched his son.

I have a deep sense that we do not say enough words of love in our marriages, families, and at church. I am not always sure what holds it back, but love is being denied.

Love may start with words but it must become so much more. Love is action. As we say, Love is a verb.

Love is always thought moved into action, words turned into deeds. The invisible is made visible. The unseen becomes seen.

Love is the risk of giving away something of ourselves and facing the potential of having less than we started with, unless we are willing to risk that, we are not loving. However in the mysterious economics of love, when we risk this sacrifice of love, we do not end up with less. We end up with more.

So is there someone towards whom you need to express the words of love, encouragement, affirmation, thankfulness, and then beyond that, make love a verb. You don't need a committee to do that. No budget needed. You don't need permission.

An agapic church looks for ways to practice love. It loves in words and also in action. It is as simple as that.

AN AGAPIC CHURCH ALWAYS REFUSES TO OPERATE FROM FEAR, BUT BUILDS CONFIDENCE IN PEOPLE.

(verse 18) John says, there is no fear in love, because perfect love casts out fear.

Some people are paralysed in life to move ahead because they are so afraid that they might fail. The fear of failure brings them to a standstill. Remember the parable of the talents: several people take what they have been given. They work hard and they increase what they have. One person took what he had been given and buried in the ground. The reason was, I was afraid. That's the fear of failure.

2 forces kill love, suffocate it, faster than anything.

1. **Criticism** — many people will not move into a venture, take on a role, stand up to lead a project if they are going to be criticised

or attacked by others who are sitting in their seats.

People will not take risks if their failures are met with “I told you so...” Sadly, churches can breed that criticism more than almost anywhere else.

We have become a society of nitpickers, dedicated to pointing out what is wrong with other people. We have become experts at criticism.

I am convinced that one of the reasons churches cannot find good people to step up into leadership today is that those people know they will be the target for criticism and complaining. They say to themselves, I don't need that. We need to affirm and encourage leaders amongst us, instead of criticizing them.

Love will not avoid speaking the truth, but it will always have the grace to speak the truth in love. The other person is not to be hurt, but encouraged and helped.

There is at times a critical spirit in us as a church that needs be changed by an outpouring of the love of God.

2. **Competition** — people cannot love if they have to win. Competition denies the ability to love. When we have to win, we cannot love.

When TV show *Survivor* first started, I watched a few episodes and I thought to myself, this is the absolute antithesis of the message of Christianity and Christian community because your success is gained by voting someone else off the island.

You win only at someone else's expense. You win when someone else loses. That breeds competition which destroys any hope of community.

Can you imagine a church like that? We are going to have a secret church meeting, and we will vote someone out of church this week! Come next Sunday and find out who that was.

If we want community with one another, and if we want to love one another, we have extinguish and eradicate fear. There cannot be love in an atmosphere of fear.

Community allows people to fail and then helps them to succeed the next time. Love cleans up the mess.

Love builds an atmosphere of confidence.

We all make mistakes, but where there is agape kind of love, mistakes are understood, accepted, whatever the problem is can be fixed, and we move on.

1st Peter 4:8 Above all love one another deeply because love covers a multitude of sins.

AN AGAPIC CHURCH ALWAYS TAKES THE INITIATIVE TO LOVE

(VERSE 19)

We love...because He first loved us.

A lot of healing in relationships never happens because we think that other person ought to go first! We say, I'm willing to meet with them, I'm willing to talk to them. Here I am, waiting. As a result, hurts stay untreated. No one is willing to move. It is a stalemate that leaves love frozen and forgiveness is paralysed.

God's kind of love, agape love, is willing to risk making the first move. This is what breaks the spiritual stalemate. Without this we are stuck in a paralyzing deadlock, a relational standoff.

If that's how God loves, that's how we have to love.

I will be honest. It is always risky to take the first move, to break the silence, to go and meet, to go and apologise.

Silence is one of the ways in which we make people pay penance. But if the possible result is healing, then the risk is worth it.

I realize that our genuine initiatives may be rebuffed, but we are responsible only for our initiative, not their response.

Is there someone towards whom you should make the first move, because that's what God did. That's an agape move.

If we wait until we can practice this kind of love perfectly, nothing will happen, so let me suggest to you that we have to start to move in this direction. Perhaps we know and experience God's love just a little. That's OK, so start there to walk it out, taking little baby steps. The more we walk it out, the more we will know it, and the more we will walk it out and so on and so on.

This morning, I said that the Spirit of God is capable of starting a tiny ripple in each one of us that could grow into a spiritual tsunami, a revolution that would change this church, council, ministry teams, pastors, every relationship here, and into this city.

There are no new programs to promote, no new ideas to parade. The catalyst is simple. It is the plain commandment of Jesus that as a response to the love of God for us, we simply love one another.

In the Book of Revelation, Jesus walks amongst the candlesticks which are his churches. One of them is really strong on teaching and doctrine. They can smell heresy a mile away. They are busy in ministry, BUT this is his word to the church.

2 I know your deeds, your hard work and your perseverance. I know that you cannot tolerate wicked men, that you have tested those who claim to be apostles but are not, and have found them false.

3 You have persevered and have endured hardships for my name, and have not grown weary.

4 Yet I hold this against you: You have forsaken your first love.

We can fail in some things, but we cannot, we must not fail here. This is the ultimate apologetic.

Think about this very seriously with me. I pray every day for VCBC to morph more and more into an agapic church, to grow more in health and from that to grow in numbers. I have a picture in my heart of people lined up waiting to get in, BUT God may be unwilling to trust us as a church with new people, especially new Christians, until we really learn to love one another more than we do. You

see, He only trusts his babies to places where there is a spirit of love, where acceptance has replaced criticism, where forgiveness has replaced unresolved anger.

We do not need any more information or instruction. We don't need classes on this. Everything we need to know is contained within the embryo of that simple instruction God is love, so let us love one another, because love comes from God. It is not hard to understand. All of us already know all of this.

So I thought about you deeply this past week. I thought about my relationship with you, and I this is what came to my mind.

If I was to deliver sermons with all the persuasiveness and eloquence in the world, but I did not love you, I would be no more than a talking head.

If I was at every council and commission meeting about the business of the church, out every evenings at meetings, and micro-managed every detail, but I did not love you, it would all mean nothing.

If I poured myself into my work so that it almost killed me, but I did not love you, it would amount to nothing, and I would be bankrupt without love.

We have three things to lead us forward: trust steadily in God, hope unswervingly, love extravagantly.

And the best of the three is love.

So I came to church this morning with really just one thing on my heart, it was to tell you that I love you.