

The Grand Slam of Love: Philia, Eros, and Agape

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Introduction:

In seminary the professors are fond of pointing out that Greek has three words for three different kinds of love. There is *Philia*, the love of family and friends. There is the romantic *Eros* of lovers, and there is the self-sacrificial love, *Agape*. Developmentally, we tend to learn and experience them in that order.

I. Philia and Policy – Sandy Reimer

We learn of love from the first moment we are born: we are held, smiled at, kissed and touched, and love becomes real. When this love comes to us in large or even just enough doses, it sets us off on the path of life with an ability to give and receive love. When this early love is withheld or twisted into abusive patterns, we spend a good part of the rest of our lives learning how to love and how to accept love. And before we go any further, let me be clear that nothing we are saying about love today has anything to do with abusive, exploitive relationships.

The Greek word *Philia* means the kind of love that is an affection or fondness for someone, like the love we have for friends and for family. Aristotle described *Philia* as affection for those who share our dispositions, who seek what we seek, who bear no grudges, and who admire us just as much as we admire them. Think of that joy of early friendship when we meet someone who seems so easy to connect with, so simpatico. It also reminded me of a conversation I had recently with a new father about his first child. *She's so cute*, he said, *I just want to snuggle her and look at her all the time*. That's *Philia*.

And yet, I want to say to Aristotle that, while this affection and fondness are the essential starting points for *Philia*, something else is needed to sustain our friendships and our family relationships. I call that other necessary ingredient *policy*.

My daughters-in-law have taught me a lot about *Philia*. As a mother of two sons, I looked forward to having more women in our immediate family. When my sons got engaged, I knew from my experiences with my own mother-in-law not to expect to become a mother to my son's wives. They already had mothers. But I did look forward to a mutual fondness and affection for one another, as well as some womanly company and conversation for me. I realized that family

relationships don't necessarily start with *Philia*. We don't choose our siblings, our parents, our children, our children's significant others or even our grandchildren. If we are very, very lucky, the affection flows easily back and forth. But I doubt that there is anyone here who could say this is true for every relationship in their family.

So when my sons got engaged, I decided to adopt a policy: my policy is that I love my daughters-in-law, my son's significant other. Period. How would it serve me not to love them? How would it serve them for me not to love them? Why wouldn't I want to love the person dearest and closest to my sons, to my son's children? I'm not telling you that I don't struggle at times, that things don't annoy me and frustrate me (and I'm sure there are plenty of times when I annoy and frustrate them), but, as a matter of policy, I am there for them over the long haul and happy for what they bring of joy and fun and woman-ness to my life.

The Grand Slam of Love
Part Two: Eros and Covenant
Andy Bachmann

The second piece of love is Eros—that love that people go crazy for. When most people think of Eros we think of that hormonally charged notion of love that floats through the air when young people discover their first crush, when college students find their first soul mates, and when two people enter that covenantal commitment known as marriage; or covenantal partnership.

Eros, as a proper noun is the Greek name of Cupid, the God of Love and desire. Eros as an adjective is Erotic, meaning something that arouses our desires.

I performed the marriage ceremony for two of my dear friends last week, and I have little doubt that every time that I said 'love' during the service, the love that they were thinking of was the love of Eros. And why not? Eros is the initial attraction and driving desire that keeps most newlyweds going that first year of marriage.

When I think of the beginnings of any romance that I've witnessed or that I've been involved in, Eros is always the dominant understanding of love. That physical manifestation of love that is unquenchable is a pretty great thing to have.

But Eros is not only about the physical aspects of love or of romance.

When Plato was talking about Eros, HE said that Eros was really that which helps the soul recall it's knowledge of beauty, and that those understandings actually help us move on to a deeper understanding of spiritual truth. In fact, Plato argued that physical intimacy and

attraction are not a necessary part of Eros at all. (Thus the word 'platonic')

Eros can also be defined as the longing for completeness. The desired fulfillment known when two become one, and not just human to human, but human to God as well.

In almost every one of the wedding reflections I've offered at the services I've performed, I say to the couple, in the vows that you are about to say the word 'love' only occurs once. And it's true, the vows we most commonly use say I promise to love and sustain you in the covenant of marriage, from this day forward, in sickness and in health, in plenty and in want, in joy and in sorrow, as long as the future may hold.

I say this because I feel that it is important for two people who are standing before a gathered congregation and before God to understand that love will take many shapes and many forms over our lifetimes. I also say this because I believe that when we make a covenantal commitment before God, we are strengthened in that union, not just physically, but emotionally and spiritually as well.

Of course, to be completely honest, I have almost no faith that newlyweds standing before me actually HEARS me say that. I've said to you before that ministers have the best seats in the house for much of what life has to offer, and standing before two people as they commit their vows is so beautiful to see. But more often than not they are just goofy with love and wedding bliss, which is why we always give them a copy of what we've said so that when they come back to earth they can read it and maybe reflect on it.

In the same way that couples promise to love and sustain through sickness and health, joy and sorrow, plenty and want without really understanding what that means until they live it; so to do we get to experience the pleasures of our desires and our passions; which are only a taste of what we can have when we discover that deeper commitment with another person, and with God.

In the same way that God gives us the gifts of physical manifestations of love to tease and coax our understandings of love, so to do the covenantal promises we make predict our later understandings of that sacred covenant.

While Eros is great all by itself, it can be so much greater; when it is cultivated, cared for and nurtured in a sacred way, as a covenantal promise; a sacred promise of God's love made flesh right before our very eyes.

The Grand Slam of Love: III
Agape and Action
Larry Reimer

New Members' Sunday is always something of a love fest that recharges all of us with the good feelings of being together. Agape, the Greek word translated as love in First Corinthians 13, is the love that pushes us a step further beyond good feelings. Agape is the decision you make to give up something of your own comfort and convenience to work for the good of another without expecting much if anything in return. When Jesus tells us to love our neighbor, he asks us to work for their well being whether we feel warm and cozy about them or not, wanting best for our neighbor whether we like them or not. Agape is loving our enemy. Agape is the much maligned tough love that Jesus uses when he goes off on the Pharisees about their hypocrisy.

Agape is what happens for new members when you roll up your sleeves and go to work here to make a difference in and beyond this church – homeless, children, youth, and the earth itself. Every one of us, old and new is called to Agape, sometimes with and for folks whom we may find difficult to like. It's considered the highest form of love.

But wait. We're on a team GOTAIL, which stands for our motto, the words of today's scripture. the "greatest of them all is love." It's the bottom of the ninth, and Team GOTAIL is up to bat with two outs. We're facing Team Might Makes Right, who is ahead by three runs. Team GOTAIL has three runners on base - Philia on third base, Eros on second, and Agape on first.

Team GOTAIL puts in a pinch hitter named Love who now steps up to the plate. But wait, the fans are looking at their score cards, and trying to read the name on the hitter's shirt through their binoculars. Who is this player called Love? Philia Love, Eros Love, and Agape Love, are already on base.

Hold on. The seminary professors were wrong, and so were the Greeks. There isn't that much difference between Philia, Eros, and Agape. To get lost in the love of family and friends, the arms of a lover, and self-sacrificial service to others are at some level all the same. Sometimes each of kind of love struggles. Sometimes each of them soars. Our pinch hitter, Al Uneetis Love, steps up the plate. Al Love bears all things – takes strike one. Love believes all things, it's a swing and a miss strike two. Love hopes all things, takes the third pitch, ball one. And Love endures all things. The pitch is high, outside. Al Love reaches connects, and lofts it over the fence. Home Run! Grand slam! (Cheers) Team The Greatest Of Them All Is Love wins when all kinds of love come together!