

“Butterfly Effects”

“The Big Nine, #1 - LOVE”

*“I give you a new command: Love one another.
Just as I have loved you, you are also to love one another.
By this everyone will know that you are my disciples,
if you love one another (John 13:34-35).
John 13:34-35; Galatians 5:22-23 ¹*

As we begin our study of “The Big Nine,” that is, the “Fruit of the Spirit” Paul lists in Galatians 5:22-23, we begin at the beginning, which, as Julie Andrews pointed out in *The Sound of Music*, is a very good place to start. And that means we begin with “love.”

You probably know that the Greek language of the first century had four words for “love.” “Eros” (ερωσ) referred primarily to physical love between men and women, and does not appear in the New Testament at all. “Storge” (στοργη) referred the love of family members for one another, and that doesn’t appear in the New Testament, either.

“Philia” (φιλια) has to do with warm, intimate friendship, of whatever sort. Φιλια appears five times in the New Testament,² and it is the root from which Philadelphia gets its name. And finally, “agape” (αγαπη), which has to do with unconquerable benevolence and triumphant goodwill, is a first century Greek word unique to the New Testament.³ I imagine that you know the word αγαπη, and I imagine that you know that the Bible uses this word to describe the love of God.

Indeed, the Bible tells us that “*God IS αγαπη*” (1 John 4:8). When Paul speaks so wonderfully of “love” in 1 Corinthians 13, the word he uses is αγαπη, and he ends his discussion with the affirmation that “the greatest of these is αγαπη” (1 Corinthians 13:13).⁴

It’s important to know that αγαπη is not “sentimentality.” Although emotion is often associated with αγαπη, αγαπη is not primarily about emotion. Αγαπη is about commitment to another’s greatest good, and this love that is God’s Love is unbelievably strong. This love is the unseen Force that energizes the cosmos. It is in fact this Love that holds the cosmos together even at this very moment (Colossians 1:15-20).

As I’ve said already, God’s Love—God’s Αγαπη—has to do with unconquerable benevolence and with triumphant goodwill . . . *directed toward us!* You and I are able to exercise this first Fruit of the Spirit toward one another (αγαπαν αλληλουσ), first and foremost because God’s Αγαπη has already been given to us (ηγαπησεν; 1 John 4:11).

¹ A sermon by Dr. David C. Stancil, delivered at the Columbia Baptist Fellowship in Columbia, MD on July 23, 2017.

² Romans 12:10; 1 Thessalonians 4:9; Hebrews 13:1; 1 Peter 1:22; 2 Peter 1:7

³ The verb form, αγαπω, appears in classical Greek, but the noun form, αγαπη, does not.

⁴ “*If I speak human or angelic tongues but do not have αγαπη, I am a noisy gong or a clanging symbol. If I have the gift of prophecy and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith so that I can move mountains but do not have αγαπη, I am nothing. And if I give away all my possessions, and if I give over my body in order to boast but do not have αγαπη, I gain nothing.*

Αγαπη is patient, αγαπη is kind. Αγαπη does not envy, is not boastful, is not arrogant, is not rude, is not self-seeking, is not irritable, and does not keep a record of wrongs. Αγαπη finds no joy in unrighteousness but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Αγαπη never ends” (1 Corinthians 13:1-8a).

Just a few verses before he gave us his list of the Fruit of the Spirit, Paul wrote that “*the whole law is fulfilled in one statement: αγαπη your neighbor as yourself*” (Galatians 5:14; Leviticus 19:18). The question for us this morning, then, has to do with what such love, such αγαπη, looks like in daily life.

In order to examine this question, I’d like to take you back to a laboratory at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology on a winter day in 1961. Dr. Edward Lorenz, a mathematician and meteorologist, was working on a meteorological experiment that yielded surprising results. Lorenz noticed that what seemed to be tiny and insignificant changes in his input data produced huge differences in the final outcomes.

After studying the matter for a decade, Dr. Lorenz presented a research paper in 1972 that launched the field now known as “chaos theory,” and that has rather considerably changed how we understand the world. That essay, now a classic, was entitled *Predictability: Does the Flap of a Butterfly’s Wings in Brazil Set off a Tornado in Texas?*⁵

According to Lorenz, a butterfly’s wing-flapping doesn’t actually cause a tornado, but it is able to start a chain reaction that leads to giant changes in world-wide weather. Lorenz’s “chaos science” has caused us to become more aware of the fact that even tiny, apparently insignificant actions can produce unbelievably large effects; and today Lorenz’s discovery is known as “the butterfly effect.”⁶

Some of you have probably recognized that the background to today’s *PowerPoint* is what’s known as a “Lorenz Attractor.” This now-famous shape is the data plot that he saw on that fateful winter day in 1961.

As it relates to our subject for today, the exercise of God’s Love—God’s αγαπη—generates a similar “butterfly effect” in the realm of the Spirit. According to Jesus, the “spiritual butterfly effect” occurs when we do small things—making a meal, visiting the sick, befriending the lonely, opening our home to guests, praying with a friend—simple acts that change the very nature of the world . . . and the future of the universe (Matthew 25:31-46).

Some of you know the hymn, “Lead On, O King Eternal.”⁷ The second stanza of that hymn goes like this: “*Lead on, O King Eternal, till sin’s fierce war shall cease, and holiness shall whisper the sweet amen of peace; for not with swords’ loud clashing, or roll of stirring drums; **with deeds of love and mercy the heav’nly kingdom comes.***” I’d like to think with you for just a bit about what such deeds of love and mercy might look like in our own lives.

Her name was Ethel. She was a member of a church I served many years ago, and she was just about the most cantankerous old woman I’ve ever known. Ethel was infamous in our congregation for being cranky.

On one Sunday morning, Ethel and I happened to be entering the large foyer of the church from opposite directions, and out of the blue she shouted to me—in the hearing of many church members—“My doctor says I need therapy! Would you be my therapist?” I agreed, for the good of the whole congregation, and thus began one of the most remarkable journeys I’ve ever taken.

Ethel lived near the church, and I began going over to her house once a week to have tea and listen to her tell her story. Ethel had sustained huge sorrows as a young woman, involving

⁵ http://eaps4.mit.edu/research/Lorenz/Butterfly_1972.pdf

⁶ http://eapsweb.mit.edu/research/Lorenz/Butterfly_1972.pdf

⁷ Words by Ernest Shurtleff (1862-1917); Music by Henry Smart (1813-1879).

the loss of both her husband and her only child. She had never spoken of these sorrows to another human being, and with her, as they do with us, those ancient, unspoken burdens and sorrows had festered and become cancers in her spirit.

As Ethel’s “therapist,” I didn’t really do much during those months beyond listening compassionately as she poured out her pain; but as I reminded our Deacons this week, **hearts are healed “by the laying on of ears,”** and little by little, Ethel was transformed.

As her burdens grew less and her heart was healed—by God’s Spirit, not by me—Ethel was transformed from one of the most cantankerous people I’ve ever known to one of the most winsome, loving and attractive people I’ve ever known. And she became the only person in nearly forty years of ministry whose funeral I agreed to go back to a former congregation to conduct.

Can you sense it? . . . “For not with swords’ loud clashing, or roll of stirring drums; **with deeds of love and mercy** the heav’nly kingdom comes.”

Adam Bruckner was an assistant coach with the Philadelphia KiXX professional soccer team,⁸ when, sixteen years ago, he began a program called “Philly Restart” that serves over 10,000 meals and helps over 5,000 Philadelphians get ID cards every year. Here’s his story:

“I used to see someone with a sign asking for money and wonder, ‘why don’t you just get a job?’ Finally, I asked. I found that a common theme for many of them was that they did not have ID. And you need ID to get a job. And you need ID to get ID. And you need money to pay for it. It’s a vicious cycle. . . .

“I used to think that the homeless were plagued by drugs, alcohol, and mental illness . . . and some are. But the river that runs through all of them is No Family—no family to bail them out of the situations many of my friends have been in. So on Monday afternoons in front of Philadelphia’s Free Library on 19th and Vine, we become a family. We serve a meal. We pray. And we love across the lines. And instead of just putting a Band-Aid on a bleeder, we help them get ID. And that ID allows them to get jobs, to cash work checks, to get into rehab, and stay in shelters. It is only one day a week. The ID’s are only one step. But it is a start. And we are a family.”⁹

Can you sense it? . . . “For not with swords’ loud clashing, or roll of stirring drums; **with deeds of love and mercy** the heav’nly kingdom comes.”

While Kary Oberbrunner was at his local gym, trying to stay focused on his exercise routine, he noticed an older man fumbling with an MP3 player and headphones. At first, Kary tried to ignore the man, but as the man became more and more frustrated, Kary reluctantly introduced himself and asked if he could help.

The man dejectedly explained, “Hi, I’m Bob, and I love jazz, but I can’t get it on this dumb player.” When Kary asked Bob if he’d ever heard of *iTunes*, Bob shot back, “I’ what?”

It slowly dawned on Kary that God had placed Bob in his path for a reason. So they set a date when they could spend some more time unraveling Bob’s MP3 troubles. Kary continues the story:

⁸ <http://www.imtellinya.com/adam-bruckners-philly-restart-offers-a-second-chance/>

⁹ www.phillyrestart.com

“Against Bob’s initial wishes, I visited him at his apartment. Turns out his wife had died a couple years before, and all his earthly possessions were crammed into a small apartment. She had been their main breadwinner, so the bank repossessed his house when he was unable to make payments.

“Bob and I cleared a space in his back room near his desktop computer. One at a time I imported his jazz CD collection onto his hard drive, intending to transfer the MP3s eventually to his player. While importing his music, Bob and I talked about life, his wife, and God.

“During the weeks following I checked in on Bob often. It’s kind of funny how two guys who are complete opposites can become the best of friends, all because of an MP3 player. Bob is 71. I am 32. Bob is black. I am white. Bob doesn’t have much money. I have more than I need. Bob is an ex-convict. I’ve never been to jail. Bob is a widower. I’m married. [In short], we’re opposites.

“A short time later I invited Bob to church, deeply desiring for him to meet Jesus. After a few invitations, he eventually accepted and sat with my wife and me last spring. If he felt awkward sitting in our mostly white church, he didn’t let on.

“After the service . . . [we] knelt near the altar, and Bob told Jesus that he wanted to follow Him. Bob confessed that he wanted to stop trying to control his life and invited Jesus to take over. . . . Bob wept, and when I looked into his eyes I noticed the distinct peace that now defined his face.

“Bob changed my life and he changed the life of my church. I get more joy from him than he’ll ever understand. . . . I’m saddened when I think that I almost missed Bob simply because I was too engrossed in my own little world.”¹⁰

Can you sense it? . . . “For not with swords’ loud clashing, or roll of stirring drums; **with deeds of love and mercy** the heav’nly kingdom comes.”

Faith Inspirational Missionary Baptist Church in Compton, California has adopted its local high school, the roughest school in a rough city. Forty percent of the students at Centennial High are from either a group home or foster home. Such students don’t have any adult who will cheer for their football team. When two church members volunteered to help coach the team, they were appalled at the condition of the locker rooms, so they organized their church to refurbish and paint them.

The team was required to help with the project, and one of the young men on the team turned to the lady next to him and asked why she was painting his locker room. She simply replied, “Because I love you.”

“Nobody loves me,” he replied. When the woman heard that, she put down her paintbrush and gave the young man a big hug.

“No one has hugged me in seven years,” he said. But she wasn’t done yet. She called over a dozen other women, and they all lined up to hug this young man, to kiss him on the cheek, to tell him how special he is to God, and that God has a purpose for his life. The young man just wept.

¹⁰ Kary Oberbrunner, “‘What About Bob?’ How That Question Changed My Life,” *New Man* eMagazine (4-14-09).

Since that time, the church has lined up 15 adults to adopt each football player and to go to their games to cheer for them, so that they can each know how special they are to God.¹¹ Can you sense it? . . . “For not with swords’ loud clashing, or roll of stirring drums; **with deeds of love and mercy** the heav’nly kingdom comes.”

Bill White was walking down a side street in that same town—Compton, California—toward a group that was redoing a house through a project like Operation Inasmuch.¹² Bill was wearing one of the bright shirts that marked him as one of the volunteers, and a neighbor to the house being redone engaged him in conversation. During that conversation the neighbor said, “I love your heart. Where can I get a heart like yours?”

Flabbergasted, Bill replied, “We got our hearts from Jesus, and He would be glad to give you one like His, too.”¹³ Can you sense it? . . . “For not with swords’ loud clashing, or roll of stirring drums; **with deeds of love and mercy** the heav’nly kingdom comes.”

Chrysostom, perhaps the greatest preacher of the fourth century, noted that “Signs and wonders may make others jealous of you, but *if you really love them*, they will both admire you and love you back. **And if they love, they will also lay hold of the truth of Jesus Christ in due time.**”¹⁴ To say that another way, *Love—αγαπη—is Evangelism*. It is αγαπη that draws people to Jesus.

My friends, we love because God has loved us first. If you know that Love, how might the “butterfly effect of Αγαπη” work through your life this week? Indeed, what deeds of love and mercy might God work through your life *today*?

¹¹ www.preachingtoday.com

¹² www.operationinasmuch.com

¹³ www.preachingtoday.com

¹⁴ Chrysostom, p. 58.