

February 12, 2017

Love Your Neighbor

Matthew 5:43-48, 1 John 4:18-21

Prayer Draw us into your love, Christ Jesus, and deliver us from fear.

This month we are giving focused attention to the Great Commandment. "Love the Lord Your God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength. Love your neighbor as yourself." (Luke 10:27) Last week we talked about the Ancient Greek language which has many words to describe love. Philius is the long-lasting loyalty between best friends. Eros, named after the Greek god of fertility, is passionate, head over heels. The list of words for love is long, and it culminates with Agape.

Agape love is selfless, self-sacrificing, and it is directed not en masse but at individuals. It's not, "I love everybody." Instead, it's "I agape the person right in front of me." Agape love prioritizes relationships ahead of rules or cultural norms. Agape prioritizes people over comfort. It's being willing to act for the good of the other, for the benefit of the other, for the health, welfare, and safety of the other. Agape isn't motivated by the heat of eros or the warmth of friendship. Instead, agape is motivated by a commitment to our shared humanity. The person who practices agape is committed to treat everyone as a beloved child of God. The Christ in me greets the Christ in thee. There is a divine spark within each person, and I will honor that divine spark no matter how the other treats me. This commitment to shared humanity comes from the Jewish - Christian understanding of creation. That God creates us in God's image, and puts the images dei imprint in each person's heart. Agape is a decision to honor God in our neighbor, stranger, and enemy and from this devotion to God, to act for the good of the other person. Agape is not about feelings or emotion. Agape is a matter of the will.

The ancient Greeks rarely used this word. After all, who could really practice this kind of selflessness? Then, God named Jesus brought agape to life. The New Testament is full of love that acts for the benefit of the other. In fact, agape is used 320 times in the New Testament. In Paul's first letter to the church in Corinth, "Agape is patient, agape is kind, faith, hope, and agape abide, these three, and the greatest is agape." In John's first letter, "God is agape and Perfect agape drives out fear." Jesus himself used this word specifically to describe the way of life. The Great Commandment is "Agape the Lord your God. Agape your neighbor as yourself." Furthermore, Agape is the foundation of Matthew 25. In this scripture, Jesus says that when we feed a hungry person, you are feeding Jesus. When you clothe, house, visit, you are doing this to Jesus. When you welcome a stranger, you are welcoming Jesus. In our reading today, from Matthew, Jesus says, "Agape your enemy." Agape is Jesus Love, and it is the defining mark of being a Christian. To be a Christian is to act from selfless, self-giving love.

So how does a person do this? First, Agape has to be learned. I listen to a podcast called, "On Being" by Krista Tripett where I heard an interview with Congressman John Lewis. As a young man, Congressman Lewis was part of the Civil Rights leadership with Dr. King. In the interview, he was asked, "How did you learn the way of non violence?" Rep. Lewis said, "We studied! We prepared. Every Tuesday night we gathered at a small UMC. Jim Lawson was our teacher. We studied Gandhi and Thoreau. We did role playing, practicing inner peace and calm, even if someone yelled at us, or pulled the chair out from under us. We learned to look people in the eye. We learned, "You may beat me, spit at me, yell all kinds of things at me, and I am still human." So when the time came to march, or sit at the lunch counters, or ride the Freedom buses, we were ready. It doesn't come naturally. You have to be taught the way of non-violence. You have to be taught this kind of love."

This is true for followers of Jesus. In a culture of fear, we have to learn agape. We have to learn Jesus love.

The essence of agape love is knowing in your mind and believing in your heart that every person, no matter what, is a beloved child of God, and everyone means everyone. Then, the decision is to treat each person as God's beloved. Even if the person is unkind to you. It's a matter not of emotion or feeling but of our will. This is what takes practice. Because it's a change in our hearts, and our behavior, our words, flow from our hearts.

Here's the thing. Most agape action amounts to little more than small acts of kindness, mostly unnoticed and overlooked, over a long period of time. A person practices agape by doing what is needed for the person in front of them. You agape the person by holding open the door, or giving them a sandwich, or any number of examples of self-less giving. This has to be learned, in a class, with others, and practiced. Here's an example. I know a person who is a weight lifter. He is quite short, only 130 pounds, and he can lift 550 pounds. He learned to do this through years of practice, with attention to diet, exercise, and technique. He also studied and trained with coaches and other people. In this practice, he learned to focus his mind and heart. It's the same with learning to practice agape. It takes spiritual maturity that comes with study, practice and prayer in a community of faith.

For me, one of the hard parts about practicing this kind of love is that the moments so often catch me off guard. Here is an example. I like to think of myself as a person who speaks up on behalf of other people. However, a few weeks ago, I was meeting with some other ministers. After our work was done, the conversation turned to commentary on things happening in our country. And in this flow of words and worries, one of the people who I deeply admire, said some things about our political leaders that really bothered me. It was unkind. It was unnecessary. In my opinion, it wasn't Jesus love. But what bothered me even more is that I didn't say anything. It's my silence that has bothered me. Silence suggests agreement. Silence is complicit with the words or action. Why didn't I speak up and say something? What would I have said, actually, what words would I have said so as to not be judgmental or self-righteous or rude? How could I speak the truth in love, while still honoring the person in front of me? I still don't know. This is why Christians like me have to study, practice, pray, and learn with other people of faith.

This may seem small and inconsequential. But as Christians we need to remember our most recent history. Before WW 2, the Christian church in America was mostly silent about what was happening to our Jewish brothers and sisters in Germany and Europe. Ministers, church people, devoted Christians, life-long followers of Christ, were mostly silent.

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In the Civil Rights movement, it happened again. One of the biggest disappointments to Dr. King was the silence of white ministers and the white Christian church. Dr. King writes about his disappointment in his letter from the Birmingham jail.

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It seems to me that Christians and the church are at another moment in time. Jesus tells us to agape our enemy. But as Christians, who is our enemy? Then Jesus says, "Be perfect, as your heavenly father is perfect." There's another translation problem in this verse. The word perfect doesn't mean without a flaw. Instead, perfect, from the Greek telos, means "wholeness." Be whole as your heavenly father is whole. This is ultimately what happens as Christians practice agape. We become whole.

Next week, we'll talk about loving ourselves. Because to love our neighbor, we have to have a self that can practice agape.