

Today we conclude our February reflection on the Great Commandment. Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength. Love your neighbor as yourself. Luke 10:27, Matthew 22, Mark 12. To summarize, we've talked about the word "love" which is agape, self-sacrificial based on a person's will and not emotion or feeling. In God's essence God agapes us without condition. Agape love includes everyone particularly the person before you, neighbor, stranger, enemy, regardless of whether you like or dislike the person. Last week we talked about agape love yourself. The only way to love another person is to have a self with which to love. The most important word in the Great Commandment is agape love.

Today I would like to put all three back together as the one Great Commandment by focusing on the scripture from 1 John, "Perfect love casts out fear." First, I'm going to talk about the word perfect which is a translation mistake. Next, I'm going to talk about a movie that shows the transformation of two people from self-loathing to agape love. Finally, I'm going to talk about agape love alongside our political reality in the UMC and in our country.

#### Perfect isn't really perfect.

The scriptures appears to say that Perfect Love casts out fear. The word perfect is a translation error and mistake. The Greek word is not perfect. The word is telos and it means mature, whole. It's the idea that maturing brings us to a place of wholeness, as God is whole. The mistaken translation of this word has caused God to be misrepresented and our perception of God's expectation of us to be misrepresented. Jesus doesn't say be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect. Jesus says be whole, complete as your heavenly Father is whole, complete. When the rich young man asks Jesus what he has to do to inherit eternal life, Jesus concludes by saying, "If you want to be perfect..." There's the translation mistake again! Jesus says to the rich young man, "If you want to mature and become whole, then sell everything you have, give it to the poor, and follow me." No one can be perfect. It's not even a gospel value. But we can mature and we can become whole. Furthermore, it's mature, whole agape that has the strength to cast out fear. Fear constricts the heart. Compassion expands the heart. With less fear, our heart has room to expand and grow, and we are free to be and become God's agape love on earth. This is God's kingdom on earth. This is God's beloved community, here and now.

#### A Tale as Old as Time: Beauty and the Beast

I've puzzled about how to explain how a person changes from fear to mature agape love. Last week I mentioned these three steps towards self love. Accept your brokenness pieces. Be kind to your brokenness pieces. Let your broken pieces be kind to you. (On Living, Kerry Egan, p. 8). But what does this really look like? Then, while reading Entertainment Weekly I had an insight. Did you know that a new movie version of Beauty and the Beast will be released next month? Starring Emma Watson? As I read about this new version, I started to think that this fairy tale could also be a way to imagine the transformation that happens as people move from fear to mature agape love.

Remember the story. A prince, from his arrogance, selfishness, and immaturity refuses to help a person in need. He is put under a spell which turns him into a beast. The only way to become a human again is for someone to love him. Seeing himself, the beast prince is ashamed. He withdraws, and is isolated in his self-loathing. Years past until one evening a man seek shelter at the palace. The beast prince calls him a thief and throws him in the dungeon. Searching for her father, Belle, French for Beauty, finds the palace and asks the Beast prince to free her father free and let her take his place. The beast agrees, and in time,, they become friends, fall in love, and in the tradition of tales as old as time, seem to be on their way to living happily ever after.

Let's try this. Together let's examine this tale of Beauty and the Beast as a story of two people maturing to agape love. To begin, look at the beast is a personification of brokenness. His heart is constricted from shame and self-loathing. Belle is the personification of wholeness. As the beast receives kindness, he is able to accept his brokenness and allows his broken self to be kind. As he matures, the beast and the beauty reunite into a person - the prince - who offers compassion to others, even to his mortal enemy.

With the idea that the beast is brokenness and belle is beauty, or blessing, let's look at the different elements in the story.

First, Belle takes her father's place. The beast sees her compassion, and in spite of himself is drawn to her kindness and agape love for her father. Over time, Belle begins to accept the broken beast. She begins to see his humanity, and she begins to understand his suffering. Belle is familiar with loneliness. She is familiar with being misunderstood by everyone around her. She knows what it's like to be different. With the beast, Belle's kindness grows.

The journey towards consciousness, to accepting the broken pieces is long, and full of traps. When Belle betrays the beast's trust. he flies into a rage, and she runs away. This is a familiar spot on the journey to agape. It's painful to become conscious of our broken pieces. It is hard to accept our broken pieces. Self-awareness is a lifelong journey and people sit down on a bench and stay there fore decades. Saint Ignatius who started the Jesuit order once said, "The unaware life is not worth living." Our brokenness will hurt us again. We will want to run away from our hurt and shame. We will want to ignore our shortcomings. Fear of brokenness constricts our heart, fear fuels rage. Wholeness runs away.

In the movie, this happens to Belle when she is surrounded by wolves. In an act of agape, the beast rescues her, and is injured. Here begins the journey towards wholeness. Belle, the wholeness and blessing accepts the help of the beast. The beast accepts the agape kindness from Belle. This is what Henri Nouwen writes about in his book, Life of the Beloved. The beast's self-loathing starts to diminish and his heart begins to expand. As their kindness to one another grows, they mature and become whole.

The story ends with mature agape driving out fear. In the heat of the battle, as the beast recognizes fear in his enemy, his own fury changes to compassion and he doesn't harm his foe. This is the moment that the beast becomes whole.

Can we, as Christians and citizens, take this journey towards mature agape? The current political climate has so much fear. Can mature, agape cast out fear in the midst of such division in our UMC and country?

I'll close with this story. Twenty-one years ago, I was living in Westerville serving as the youth minister in a large church. Greg was living in DC where he worked on staff for Congressman Dave Hobson. When we became engaged, some people in the youth ministry asked, "Are you really marrying a Republican?" "Well," I said, "I'm marrying Greg Moody and among other things, he is also a Republican." I don't know if anyone in Greg's work asked him, "Are you really marrying a Democrat?" It was church people, active Christians, some of whom remain dear friends, who asked. Regardless of a person's politics, for the church to be the Body of Christ, there has to be honest hospitality for all people. We don't have to agree. With respect, we can and will discuss and debate. Still Christians are both conservative and liberal, and the faith community has to be open to all. Both sides are broken. Can both sides learn to be kind?

Recently I was listening to a sermon by Adam Hamilton ([http://cor.org/leawood/sermon-series/unafraid-living-with-courage-and-hope#d/sermon/8958/cor\\_1](http://cor.org/leawood/sermon-series/unafraid-living-with-courage-and-hope#d/sermon/8958/cor_1)) and he gave these definitions for conservative and liberal. A conservative wants to conserve certain things that are true and keep these even if it isn't popular. A liberal is generous in spirit and open to reform. Here is the thing to remember. Jesus called both conservatives and liberals in his group of twelve disciples. Jesus called Matthew the tax collector - who worked for the Romans and collected taxes keeping an economic structure and Jesus called Simon the Zealot. Zealots were a specific group within the Jewish people. They were committed to driving the Romans out of Jerusalem completely and used extreme means to achieve this. Zealots were also known as the sicarri because they carried little daggers named sicae. The zealots would hide the daggers in their robes. Then, in a crowd, they would pull them out and attack both Romans and Jewish people who worked for the Romans - like tax collectors. Then they would fade back into the crowd. Jesus called both conservative and liberal, even extremes of both, to be his disciples. I wonder what kind of discussions Matthew and Simon had? I wonder how they moved from their extreme political positions to a place of mature agape love? Both were martyred for their Christian faith.

Can Christians like us learn to give and receive agape love and live sacrificially for all people and the world? Yes, Christians like us can learn. And it seems this is what Jesus expects of us.

The question is not can we. Of course we can. The question is will we. Will Christians like us decide, it's a matter of our will not emotion or feeling, will we decide to recognize what is broken in our personal lives, in our church and community and in our country, will we accept the broken pieces, be kind to this, and let the broken pieces be kind to us? Will we, Christians and people of conscience, beauties and beasts, conservatives and liberals, will we take the next step to wholeness, to mature agape for ourselves, our neighbors, and God?

As you read in the bulletin, we are together for a little while longer. Because of our current reality of losing members and the resulting financial decline, St. Luke's has asked for a new pastor who will be less-than-full-time. Per the conference calendar, the next pastor will begin on June 25 and so my final Sunday as the pastor of St. Luke's June 18.

It is my hope and prayer that instead of constricting in fear, we will choose compassion, to mature in agape love. That we will acknowledge our brokenness, be kind, and let it be kind to us. I'm not sure how to do this. However I do know that the season of Lent begins this Wed, on Ash Wednesday. Lent is a season of prayer and reflection. Perhaps the next forty days could be a time for us to reflect as a community, to take the next faithful step towards mature agape love for ourselves, our neighbors, and God. This will cast out fear. every time.