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Sixth Sunday of Easter
May 13, 2012

Readings:

FIRST READING: ACTS 10:44-48

While Peter was still speaking, the Holy Spirit fell upon all who heard the word. The circumcised believers who had come with Peter were astounded that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on the Gentiles, for they heard them speaking in tongues and extolling God. Then Peter said, "Can anyone withhold the water for baptizing these people who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?" So he ordered them to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ. Then they invited him to stay for several days.

SECOND READING: JOHN 15:9-17

As God has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love. If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept God's commandments and abide in God's love. I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete. "This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you. I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from God. You did not choose me but I chose you. And I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last, so that God will give you whatever you ask God in my name. I am giving you these commands so that you may love one another.

Like It or Not
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Sermon Notes: These are unedited notes that guided this morning's provocation.

ex-is'-tay-mee

Verb

Definition

1. to throw out of position, displace
 - a. to amaze, to astonish, throw into wonderment
 - b. to be amazed, astounded
 - c. to be out of one's mind, besides one's self, insane

On this Mother's Day, Parent's Day, Those who provided us with the Best in Family Love Day, I could make the argument that the entire New Testament is about coming to understand love, and I don't think that would bring up much of an argument.

I could make the argument, I'm pretty sure, that like with every family, the degree to which love is present is the degree to which we are prepared to enter into the world and navigate its twists and turns, hopefully in loving ways.

In fact, I could take that further and make the case that around the globe, throughout the history of time and the future to come – our differences root themselves in the soil of our understanding of love and the degree to which we care for it.

A big part of the challenge in any conversation, sermon, or narrative about *love* is the meaning of love in use.

I don't believe love is a defined thing, any more than I think God can be defined (who would want a god you could define?). Still, using the language we have, difficulty in "talking love" hinges on definition.

And then, if we are inclined to go further, the next question is "which" love do we apply to the situation or discussion at hand?

Strict love?

Permissive love?

Distant love?

Tough love?

Motherly love?

Fatherly love?

Brotherly or sisterly love?

Same or different gender love

Pastoral love?

Love, love, love –

even the Greeks has to break it up into different categories: *agape*, *phileo*, *storge*, and *eros*. Of these four, three appear in the Bible. *Eros*, the proper noun for the Greek god of Love and from which words such as erotic emanate, is not in the Bible. Hmmm....

Most likely, it is not referred to because of the teachings of Jesus and reference to God as the God of Love not to be confused with *Eros*, for it is the God of Love *Agape* to which the word itself attempts to refer

Agape in the Greek is the very nature of God. It is not a love of *feeling* necessarily, but a love that does things. *Agape is love* not because of what it feels like but because of what it does. It is why Jesus can command the disciples and us to love, since it is an action. This love is known by the action that it prompts.

For example, a parent or guardian who stays up all night caring for a sick child doesn't do it because it feels good or even that one might *want* to do, but does it because it is a true act of *agape* love. A love of action.¹

There's another expression going around to add to our *mind the gap, it is what it is*, and that is *would you rather be right or happy*. Ostensibly meaning, one does not always have to be right, restraint of pen and tongue, let it go...and all that is true.

But sometimes *the right thing to do* doesn't make us happy in the gleeful joyful way. Loving in the way of *Agape* can be like that. Can be like...

God sending God's only son into the world, knowing...

This kind of love then is an act of choice.

It is the love and the choice to such love in Jesus' commandment to "love one another as I have loved you."

And not everyone, not even the deisciples with Jesus at the time got it. We get a glimpse into the confusion in a discourse between Jesus and Simon Peter that involves *agape* love and *phileos*— really not love, but more of a strong friendship a deep friendship. Taken from John 21:15 and following. After Jesus rose from the dead, Jesus met Simon Peter:

Jesus: Simon...do you love (*agape*) me more than these [fish?].

Peter: Yes, Lord; you know that I love (*phileo*) you.

Jesus: Simon...do you...love (*agape*) me?

Peter: Yes, Lord, you know that I love (*phileo*) you.

Jesus: Simon...do you love (*phileo*) me?

Peter: [Grieved] "Lord...you know that I love (*phileo*) you."

The love of ice cream is not the same love for a person. The Greek translation is the play between Jesus using the Greek word: *agapas* and Simon Peter using *philo*, literally – "I have affection for you."

Jesus repeats his question of Peter three times, the first two times Jesus uses *agapas* and Simon Peter uses *philo*. The text then says that Simon Peter was grieved, understanding that to mean that he was becoming upset because he felt as though Jesus was questioning his *phileos* for him.

¹ <http://www.truthortradition.com/modules.php?file=article&name=News&sid=743#null>

Did Jesus recognize Simon Peter's inability to understand the *agape* of which Jesus spoke? Hard to say. But the third time Jesus uses the Greek word *Phileis* – “have you affection for me” and Peter answers as he did before with *philo* – “you know I have affection for you.”²

Jesus was asking Simon Peter if he were able to love him with the love of God. The best Peter could do was to love Jesus on the strongest of friendship and affection.

Just to finish with the fourth type of love *storge*, this is the love that *naturally* occurs between parents/guardians and children, siblings, and spouses. It is compounded with *philos* so that in Romans 12:10 we have *philostorgi* – that is, having *brotherly (or sisterly) love toward one another*:

It seems to me that we easily get the *eros*, *philos*, *storgi* – but we have a great deal of trouble with the *agape* – and why not? It is the love of God – not having love for God, but literally the *love of God* that *God has for us, so much so that God gave us God's son*,

That love, the giving, sacrificial, overarching love under which all creation exists. Jesus knew that in ways that few have. And when it was present – in action – the results were “astounding.”

In the first reading of Acts, Peter is speaking and while he does “the Holy Spirit” fell upon all who heard the word. The Scripture tells us that the *circumcised believers*, that is those who had followed the Judaic Laws of circumcision and believed that there was a particular path to be followed to holiness were *astounded* that God's grace, God's *agape* fell even on the Gentiles, those who were not circumcised.

A requirement that was thought to be necessary – no longer had any impact in the overarching and astounding presence of God – of God is Love – of Agape.

This is not the same as “I love ice cream love.”

I don't talk politics from the pulpit. I will talk about policies and their impact on people. I do not believe it is my place to endorse one candidate or another from here. I may work elsewhere for those I support as an individual, but I would never want to have someone feel that in order to be welcome here they need to have a particular political view or support a particular political candidate.

But this week, in the shadow of a decision in North Carolina to become the 32nd State in the nation to support a State Constitutional Amendment to ban same gender marriages, in effect by defining marriage as only between a man and a

² <http://interlinearbible.org/john/21-17.htm>

woman, the President affirmed his belief that same gender loving couples should have the right to marry.

Whether he knew it or not or even thinks in these terms, I don't know – but I do. When President Obama said that his position had evolved from many fronts, including from the Bible, by generally referring to the Golden Rule of doing unto others as you would have others do unto you – he included the Bible as a reason without degree for affirming same gender marriage. More than anything, it was a way to address the use of the Bible as part of the arguments against same gender marriage.

While he didn't quote John in his welcome affirmation

for me and likely for you, he might have, when Jesus commanded his disciples in this morning's readings" "This is my commandment, that you love (agapate) one another as I have loved (egapesa) you. No one has greater love than this than to lay down his love (agapen) for his friends (philon)."

This is the love that can be commanded because it is the love that God calls us to embrace. The love that is not a *feel good* eros, philos, or storgi – but a motherly love in the best of moms and dads; parents and guardians; neighbors and friends; and throughout the human race that rises to the degree of God and God's grace falling upon us all; calling us to set aside differences – because in God's love, we are not different – regardless of how we feel.

And as we as a world, a nation, a State, a community, a family, a member of church, or however we see ourselves – see one another as the Love of God – we will be astounded, for all our differences that divide us and cause us rancor will be brilliantly obliterated by such a love. Jesus knew this love and he struggled – gave his life, in fact – so others could know it. Know it – not just in how it may make us feel – but know it in the actions it calls us to take toward others.

*Tauta entollomai hymin hina agapate allēous.
These things I command you that you love one another.*

He might have said, "like it or not."

Amen.