Sermon for the 4th Sunday after Epiphany

1 Corinthians 13:1-13

January 30, 2022

Most of the weddings I’ve had the honor of presiding at have included our Epistle reading for today.

I once thought Paul would be mystified, perhaps even disappointed, by our custom of reading this passage during a wedding.

I imagined that he would be quick to point out that he’s not talking about romantic love here. That he would point to the fact that the Greeks had 4 words for love for our one, and what he meant by ‘love’ was not *eros*, the love associated with passion or attraction. It’s not *storge*, the affection we feel toward a spouse, child, or pet. It’s not *phileo*, the fondness and friendship kind of love.

What he meant by ‘love’ is *agape*, a deep and abiding concern for the well-being of another.

But I think Paul was also wise enough to know that the lines of distinction between these kinds of love are not clear. After all, it makes sense that we should have *agape* love for those we are fond of, whatever the relationship. I suspect Paul would be quick to say that if you *don’t* have agape love for those you feel affection for, then your love is incomplete.

*Agape* is the word used in John 3:16: For God so loved the world that God sent the Son, that all who believe in him might not perish, but have eternal life. So, the early church considered *agape* love to be the love God has for us. As disciples of Jesus, it should then be the love we have for each other. Whether that’s your spouse, child, parent, sibling, neighbor… or the person we never meet.

One of my favorite things about this passage is something that is obscured by the translation we use. In verses 4-7, Paul tells us that love is patient, love is kind, and so on. But in the Greek, all the descriptions Paul uses…. they’re all *verbs*. None of them are adjectives.

The love Paul describes, then, is a collection of actions. *Intentional* actions.

Love waits. Love cares. Love doesn’t seek to possess.

I’m fond of the translation of these verses from *The Message*, which gets us closer to the seeing these words as actions:

*“*Love never gives up. Love cares more for others than for self. Love doesn’t want what it doesn’t have. Love doesn’t strut, doesn’t have a swelled head, doesn’t force itself on others,  
isn’t always ‘me first,’ doesn’t fly off the handle, doesn’t keep score of the sins of others, doesn’t revel when others grovel, takes pleasure in the flowering of truth, puts up with anything, trusts God always, always looks for the best, never looks back, but keeps going to the end.”

*This* is the love we are called to have for ourselves and for our neighbor. It is the love Jesus put in action, despite those who turned on him when he said things they didn’t like, despite those who tried to silence him. Despite those who plotted to have him killed.

And if Paul were here to speak to us about this, he’d be quick to remind us that God’s love for us is most clearly seen in Jesus’ crucifixion and resurrection. In the lengths that God goes to so that we never need fear that we will be separated from God.

Paul placed these words about *agape* love in the midst of his discourse on spiritual gifts. It’s pretty clear that the people in Corinth were having a hard time setting aside their egos and remaining united as a community of faith.

To address the tensions that had developed among the people in the early church in Corinth, Paul says, “Look, the Spirit gives lots of different gifts. But all of them come from the Spirit and all of them are intended for the building up of the community. Not so you can boast. And you’re all part of the Body of Christ, none of you more important than the other. Furthermore, nobody is unnecessary. So stop trying to create a hierarchy of gifts, because that leads to a hierarchy in the community. And start practicing *agape* love for each other. Because without it, your gifts can easily be used for purposes *other* than living out your faith. Purposes that tear others down, rather than build them up.”

Paul understood that the early church needed to be united in purpose in order to survive. The Roman Empire didn’t make it easy for anybody who didn’t buy into the system of emperor worship. The Jewish followers of Jesus weren’t entirely sold on the idea of incorporating Gentiles without them adopting Jewish practices like circumcision and keeping Kosher. And the social structure, the way people understood society to function, was at odds with the teachings of Jesus.

So if the people were expending their efforts on bickering amongst themselves, or ranking spiritual gifts, they weren’t creating conditions that would allow for the community to flourish.

In Matthew 16, we hear Jesus say, “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it.”[[1]](#footnote-1)

Denying ourselves doesn’t mean we ignore our own needs. It doesn’t mean we expend all our energies on taking care of others. It means emptying ourselves of anything that distracts us from the way of Christ. And allowing ourselves to be filled with the *agape* love God has for us, then sharing that love with others.

Denying ourselves means practicing *agape* love. It means learning patience, practicing kindness, refraining from jealousy and arrogance and rudeness. It means not insisting on being right all the time, not keeping score. It means learning to balance our needs with those of others.

So maybe it’s a good reading for weddings after all.

Only *agape* love heals our wounds. Only *agape* love patches our hearts and our relationships back together when they have been broken.

*Agape* love is giving and forgiving.

Which is what God is for us – giving and forgiving.

Strengthened by God’s love for us, may we grow in our love for our neighbor.

Freed by God’s grace, may we be ready to forgive as we are forgiven.

1. Matthew 16:24-25, New Revised Standard Version [↑](#footnote-ref-1)