

“A LOVE THAT IS OUT OF THIS WORLD”

The Rev. Victor Kim

John 15:9-17

(05-09-21)

God is love. For many that sums up the core of the Christian faith. God is love, so we should love God and we should love one another. Jesus doesn't make many explicit commands in the Bible, but he makes one in our reading from the gospel of John this morning. ***This is my commandment, says Jesus, that you love one other as I have loved you. It seems so simple. If only it were so simple!***

Will Willimon from Duke Divinity School shares the following story. A minister tells of one occasion when he was working at a church near a major highway. On my way out of the church late one afternoon, I was chagrined to see, coming towards the church down the walkway, a rather forlorn looking man with a small bag, obviously a wanderer, a vagabond, a drifter, coming toward the church seeking a handout. This is what you get for having a church situated near a busy highway. These drifters pass through about twice a week, seeking a tank of gas for their trip, a meal, a gift, preferably in cash, for their journey to who knows where. They always have some sad story of woe to tell but the end is always the same, can you spare some cash? I sighed as I watched the man approach, said the minister. It had been a long day. I had a meeting to return for that night and I was anxious to get home. I would meet him at the door, head him off, give him the only cash I had, a mere \$15.00 as I recall, and then send him, and me, on our way. “What can I do for you?” I asked with some annoyance in my voice. “I wondered if you might be able to help a fella on the way South,” he said. “I was headed down to....” “Yes, yes,” I said. “Well, I’m in a bit of a rush. So here is all I have. A five and a ten. That’s all I’ve got.” The minister recalled, man took the money, looked at it, and without a word, he turned, and headed out toward the street. Then he stopped and turned toward me as I locked the church door. “I guess you think I’m supposed to thank you, to be grateful,” he said with a surprising tone of defiance. “Well,” I said, “now that you mention it, a little gratitude wouldn’t hurt.” “Well, I’m not going to thank you. You want to know why?” he sneered. “Why?” I asked. ***“Because you are a Christian. You don’t help me because you want to. You have to help me because he told you to help me!” And then he left.***

(William Willimon, Commanded to Love, Duke Chapel Service, 1997)

Love one another as I have loved you. If only it were that simple! ***But here’s the kicker – the vagabond was right.*** To love as Jesus loves us means that we **do** have to help people who aren’t always grateful, or all that lovable. ***We really don’t have a choice.*** You may protest, what kind of love has no choice? Is love truly love if there is no freedom to choose? I suppose it all depends on what our definition of love is. When we speak about love, most often we speak about love as a feeling. When we speak of love as a feeling, we are speaking of two definitions of love which originate from the Greek words, ***eros*** and ***philia***. ***Eros*** is romantic love, the love of physical attraction, erotic love. ***Philia*** is friendship love, the love of brother

and sister, the love which comes from bonding and closeness, that's why they call Philadelphia the city of brotherly love. We get to choose who we love romantically, we can choose our friends, and even though our siblings aren't chosen by us, we can still choose to love them or not. And that choice is contingent on our feelings. It's how we feel about someone which allows us differentiate whether we love them romantically or platonically. It's how we feel about another which either leads to togetherness or separation.

But the love Jesus speaks of in our reading from John's gospel account, and indeed whenever Jesus speaks of God's love of humanity and the command to love one another, that word for love is always **agape**, not eros or philia. **And agape is the love of sacrifice, the love of welcome, it is love, not as a feeling, but love as an act, an intentional choice, a decision of will. Agape is the love of God for us.** Agape is a love which is not based on God's romantic feeling toward us or God's bonding with us. Agape is God's love for us in spite of not always being happy or pleased with us or with our actions. Agape is God's love for us knowing full well that we would reject him and reject his son. **Agape, then, is not feeling, but action, sacrificial action on behalf of others.**

And this agape, this love of God in Jesus Christ, is not a love which is original to us, but it is a love which is derivative, it is derived from another love. What that means is that we are to love one another, we are to agape one another, because God in Jesus Christ has loved us, because God agapes us first. We are to love one another as Jesus has loved us. **And if God in sending us Jesus his son demonstrated a love which is not based on feeling, not conditional or situational, but intentional, sacrificial and a decision of his will, and that is the love we are to practice with one another, how then can the way we love those around us really ever be a choice?**

We can choose many things, but if we are disciples of Jesus, our love for God and for our brothers and sisters, cannot be a choice. **The vagabond was right. The minister may or may not have wanted to help him, but in the end he had no choice.** The evidence that we are followers of Christ, that we are disciples of Jesus, isn't in our church attendance or in our theological intricacies. **It is in how we treat our fellow human beings. It is in how we are willing to love sacrificially.**

Christian love is derivative, it does not originate with us, it originates with God. It is a love then, that is out of this world. It is a love so pure and so wonderful, so passionate and committed, it is a love that is out of this world. And Jesus says that we as his disciples, we as the church know this love because he gave it to us. **As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you, abide in my love.** As long as the church abides in the love of Jesus Christ, the love of God, we know that we will remain in Christ's love and his joy will be in us and our joy will be complete. **Because agape love is a love which begins with God and not with us, it is imperative that the church never forget our first love, the one who first loved us.**

Amid the globalization of our world, the paradox is that the world has become more and more personal. You might think that the problems of our world today are huge in scope and scale and in a way they are, consider the issue of climate change for one example, but they are also more personal as well. Who could have imagined that a virus that was first detected in a city most of us knew nothing about somewhere in China would morph into a global pandemic which has impacted each and every one of our lives on a deeply personal level.

We no longer can live in isolation, even the most distant event across the world can have an impact on our lives today. Think about issues like homelessness, mental illness, substance abuse, issues which were conveniently swept under the rug only few generations ago, now today they are part of our social fabric. ***These issues will not be ignored. They affect our lives. They affect the life of the church.***

Jesus taught about love more than anything else. But the love Jesus taught about wasn't the love we often think about. It's not the romantic, physical love we often crave that Jesus emphasized, Jesus taught about God's sacrificial, intentional love. He taught about a love which binds people together in a very relational and spiritual way. He taught about a love which is willing to lay down one's life for a friend. Jesus taught about a love which intentionally seeks out the good of the other, even when it might cause hurt to ourselves.

On this Mother's Day, I think that the closest we come to understanding the love of God for us is when we become a parent. When we decide to have a child we make a deliberate, intentional choice to love. As parents, we know that there are times, many times, when our children do things that hurt us, make us crazy, disappoint us, make us angry. But we still love them. We know we can't always protect them or save them from the consequences of their actions or choices, but we still love them. Sometime to love them hurts us, pains us, causes us to suffer. We don't have to love them, and they don't have to love us back, but we do love them, we choose to, because our love for our children is rooted in agape.

When we love like Jesus, based not on feeling, but on doing what's right, we will be following the command of God. When we love like Jesus, we will want to show it, not because we have to, but because we want to. Agape love isn't a blind, ignorant love. Agape is a love that continues to choose to love, despite the facts. Real love, God's love, finds the way to move on despite failure and disappointment.

In a world that has become so personal, where issues are impossible to escape from, for us and for the church, we need a love that is out of this world. We need to be rooted in a love which does not originate within us but is received as a gift from the God who so loved the world that he sent his son Jesus in the greatest demonstration of agape in history. We as the church need to be about love, as God is about love, but we better be very clear what that love

implies. ***If we truly desire to love as God in Jesus Christ has loved us, we don't have much of a choice.*** Who are those people with whom we have difficulty expressing God's love? Who are those that we feel are ungrateful, undeserving, unlovable? Do they not deserve our love, our agape? ***Isn't it commanded of us?*** We are to be sacrificial, we must be intentional, we must be willing to love one another as Jesus loves us. ***It's not easy, but it is essential.***

So, how's the state of our agape? Our world can be a very messy place, where actions taken far from our context filter down to us and impact us at every level. Decisions taken by people who have no personal connection to us shape the context of the societies in which we live. Homelessness isn't something that most of us have experienced, but don't tell me that it doesn't impact my life or yours. It's the same with issues of addiction, though it may not be our reality, it is part of the fabric of the reality in which we live. You might argue that you or your family had nothing to do with decisions made by earlier generations around the treatment of indigenous peoples but it doesn't exempt us from the reality that we all need to engage in a response that is rooted in healing, reconciliation and justice. Most people have been very careful in adhering to the guidance from our health authorities around the pandemic, but some refuse to listen. That refusal impacts each of us, none of us are exempt from the consequences.

Our world is a very personal place, big issues impact each of us in intimate ways. ***The world today more than ever, needs people of agape, it needs the church to be a strong source of God's agape. And that's where our hope and strength come from.*** For we did not choose God, ***but God chose us in Jesus Christ and in his love,*** a love that is out of this world, and he chose us to bear fruit. We are to love one another as we have been loved by Jesus.

When we find it difficult, when we would rather not, when we find so many reasons why we shouldn't, we need to remember that every reason we can think of and so much more, ***Jesus also faced concerning us*** and yet he still chose, intentionally and sacrificially, to love us, to give his own life for us, to redeem us for a new and eternal life. ***It reminds us of how critical it is for us to be connected to the vine.*** In my midweek meditation this week I spoke about a sense of languishing, some have called it the dominant emotion of the past year. Given the effects of the pandemic, we can understand why this sense of languishing is affecting so many, ***but Jesus intends us not to languish, but to flourish, to thrive,*** and we can't do that, we can't flourish if we don't love, love others, ***and we can't love others with this agape love if we don't know it first in ourselves.*** We have to be connected to the vine, we have to know God's agape in our lives personally. We have to know that Jesus willingly laid down his life for us, for his friends. Only when we know this, only when this love has been received in our hearts, can we begin to love this way.

If you don't know this love and you want to know it, ask God, pray to God to show you. Pray that God's Spirit will fill your heart and transform you, change you, redeem you, renew you,

make you a new creation in Christ. All you need to do is ask and you will receive. But it's not magic, **you still need to work at it, but we do so as we love one another as we know Jesus has loved us.**

It's so critical for us and for the church to remain in Christ, for without remaining in him we cannot bear fruit, apart from him we can do nothing. But if we remain in him and abide in him, we will be his disciples and bear much fruit. **So, my friends, may that love always inform our love, that we would be Christ's people and that his church would continue to be a faithful witness to the hope, the grace, the joy and love which is the gift of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.**

Thanks be to God, Amen!