

Four Pillars of Christian Faith, Part III: Agape – Self-Sacrificial Love
Psalm 136, John 15.12–17, Romans 12.9–21
The Rev. Hal Chorpensing, Plymouth Cong'l UCC, 11 July 2004

This is the third installment of our sermon series, “Four Pillars of Christian Faith.” The first week, I talked about the nature and importance of community (*koinonía*), and last week I addressed ways we can build relationship with God (*pistis*). And today, I turn to the concept of self-sacrificial love (*agape*).

Have you ever noticed how many references are made to love in the Bible? (For those of you who are numerically oriented, there are 536!) Clearly, love is an important theme for each of the major world religions. But, there are different types of love described in the Bible, and we lose some of the shading for these varieties in English, which is unusual for our typically rich language.

To start with a negative stroke, I’m not going to be talking about sentimental, romantic love: the kind that makes eight-year-old boys want to retch. There will be no references to *Sleepless in Seattle* or *Pretty Woman* in this sermon.

Having said that, the Greek term *eros*, which is used to describe not only sexual desire, but also the creative force in love, is a component of divine love. If you have read the Song of Solomon, you know that there is certainly a sense of *eros* in the Bible. Interestingly, though, the word is never used in the New Testament.

Another form of love is described by the word, *philia*, and connotes the sense of fraternal love or friendship. *Philia* is used extensively in the New Testament. And it’s the root of a slew of English words from philosophy to philanthropy. The great 20th century theologian Paul Tillich describes *philia* as being a “person-to-person love between equals.”¹ This, of course, is not a bad thing. It can be symbiotic and life-giving for both parties. But it does have the potential to establish preferential love. I experience *philia* for some of my friends on a deeper level than others, and I also expect to get something in return.

The third Greek word for love is *agape*. To use a current idiom, *agape* conveys a sense of *unconditional love*. It connotes deep, concerned love, but also love without boundaries, love without distinctions, love without expecting something in return. Hear the way Tillich describes it: “Agape cuts through the separation of equals and unequals, of sympathy and antipathy, or friendship and indifference, of desire and disgust. It needs no sympathy in order to love; it love what it has to reject in terms of *philia*. *Agape* loves in everybody and, through everybody, love itself. . . . *Agape* conquers the ambiguities of love itself.”²

So far, I’ve been speaking primarily about human love, the kind of relationship that happens between people. But, any discussion of love would be vacuous if it did not address the kind of love that God has for humanity. In the psalm we read this morning, the constant refrain is “God’s steadfast love endures forever.” The Hebrew word in Psalm 136 is *hesed*, which does mean steadfast or faithful love, but it also has deeper, nuanced meanings. In the King James Version, *hesed* is often translated as *mercy*, and when the Hebrew Bible was translated into Greek in the second century BC, the seventy scholars often chose the Greek word *eleos* or compassion to represent *hesed*. So, if we were to read the refrain of the psalm, “God’s compassion endures forever,” it might convey a different

¹ Paul Tillich, *Love, Power, and Justice*. (London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1954), quoted in *The Essential Tillich*, ed. Forrester Church, (NY: Macmillan, 1987), p. 153.

² *ibid.*, p. 154.

sense of God's love for humanity. And tying it to last week's sermon, *hesed* is the foundation of our relationship with God.

So, before we get too far afield, let me do a quick review of the types of love I've described: *eros* (creative-force love), *philia* (fraternal love), *agape* (unconditional love), and *hesed* (God's compassionate love for humanity).



So, let's take a look at some other references to love in the Bible. The first epistle of John records the famous words, "God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them."³ The author uses the word *agape* to be equal to God: "God is *agape*." God is love without boundaries.

And when the Pharisee asked Jesus to decide which was the greatest commandment, Jesus replied, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind... [and] you shall love your neighbor as yourself."⁴ The way that Jesus describes the way we should love God, other, and self is with *agape*. "You will have a relationship of *agape* with God, using your heart, soul, and mind. And you will embody *agape* in your relationships with others and yourself." No conditions. No distinctions. That is the greatest commandment.

In the Sermon on the Plain, Jesus tells us, "Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you."⁵ That sounds pretty unconditional to me, and what Greek word do you think represents that kind of love? *Agape*.

Walter Wink, one of the New Testament scholars I respect the most, writes that "Loving our enemies has become, in our time, the criterion of true Christian faith. It may seem impossible, yet it can be done. At no point is the inrush of divine grace so immediately and concretely perceptible as in those moments when we let go our hatred and relax into God's love. No miracle is so awesome, so necessary, and so frequent."⁶

So, who are you called to love? Who is in the "enemy" column on your list? Is it a malicious manager? An annoying neighbor? A politician on the other side of the aisle? Someone whose faith doesn't mirror yours?



Perhaps the most familiar reference to love in the New Testament is in Paul's first letter to the church in Corinth, in a passage often read at weddings: "*Agape* is patient; *agape* is kind; *agape* is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude... Faith, hope, and *agape* abide, these three; and the greatest of these is *agape*."⁷

"For Paul," writes Marcus Borg, "love is the primary gift of the Spirit, indeed the definitive gift. The same is true for Jesus. For Jesus, the primary quality of a life centered in God is compassion.... Where Paul uses the word 'love,' Jesus uses the word 'compassion.'"⁸

The Latin roots⁹ of the English word *compassion* mean "to suffer with." With whom? Compassion – love – must, by necessity, have an object. It can't exist in a vacuum

³ 1 John 4.16

⁴ Matthew 22.37 ff.

⁵ Luke 6.27-28

⁶ Walter Wink, *Engaging the Powers*. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992), p. 275.

⁷ 1 Corinthians 13.4-13

⁸ Marcus Borg. *The Heart of Christianity*. (SF: HarperSanFrancisco, 2003), p122.

⁹ *cum + patior*

as a theoretical construct. One of the Greek words for compassion means to feel affinity for someone deep in your gut.¹⁰ It is impossible to feel compassion superficially: it is a feeling in your innermost being. And the same is true in Hebrew and in Aramaic, Jesus' mother tongue.

Borg writes that in those languages, the associations of the word "are strikingly evocative: to be compassionate is to be 'womblike': life-giving, nourishing, embracing. So God is; so we are to be. Thus growth in love, growth in compassion, is the primary quality of life in the Spirit....The fruit is love. Indeed, such fruit is the purpose of the Christian life."¹¹



One truism of life is that mothers give deeply of themselves to their children. Something amazing happens in the months between conception and birth. Most parents would willingly give their own lives for their children, and some do.

The question is this: how can we extend that womblike compassion to all persons? How can we extend it to the non-discriminating, boundaryless notion of *agape* and make it work for all whom we encounter, not just our offspring?

Agape breaks down barriers between "us" and "them." That sounds pretty good, doesn't it? Perhaps it's appealing to us because in the plural it doesn't sound quite so immediate, so personal. But what happens when we put "us" and "them" into the singular? In our culture it's not quite as comfortable and easy when we start talking about breaking down barriers between "me" and "you." I might have to relinquish something of my *self*. It makes an oxymoron of the phrase "enlightened self-interest." And it ties back to the primacy of *koinonía* or community.

The "old paradigm" of Protestantism in this country projected the notion that we need to be good and loving now so that we will receive a heavenly reward later. Fundamentalist Christianity still markets individual salvation as an eternal insurance policy for the individual soul. But if we succeed in breaking down the barriers between "us" and "them" and "me" and "you," then individual salvation – *my* personal salvation – becomes nearly irrelevant.

Nowhere in our time has *agape* been lived out more clearly than in South Africa, with the end of apartheid. Archbishop Desmond Tutu sums up his *ubuntu* theology with the simple sentence: "I am because you are." Imagine yourself as a black South African staring into the face of a white Afrikaner, after centuries of oppression, and being able to say, "I am because you are." It is breaking down the barriers between "me" and "you." In order to say that, one needs to be willing not only to acknowledge our common life, but also to let go of hostility: to sacrifice our animosity on the altar of forgiveness.

I don't think that could have happened in our culture. North American society tells us that we can have it all: we can be young (or at least look young), beautiful, and rich. We mistakenly entrust our salvation in material wealth and individual achievement.

When was the last time you saw a Fidelity Investments commercial that talked about letting go of your quest for individual financial security? (Jesus talked about that.)

¹²

When was the last time you saw a HumVee ad that encouraged you to resettle a refugee family or build a Habitat house, rather than buy a pricey, gargantuan gas-guzzler?

¹⁰ The verb *splagchnidzomai* derives from *splagchnon*, which mean bowels, guts, heart, inner parts.

¹¹ Borg, *op. cit.*, pp. 122-123.

¹² See The Parable of the Rich Fool, Luke 12.13 ff.

It just doesn't happen. Self-giving love (*agape*) and sacrifice fly in the face of a worldview that is based on economic self-interest. But, that is not the worldview that we, as Christians, are called to hold. Paul writes to "present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by renewing your minds."¹³

Most of us flinch at the word sacrifice. It makes us uncomfortable. It might even seem barbaric. We're not talking about sacrificing animals on an altar, but rather on giving deeply of ourselves, even when it does not seem to be in our own self-interest.

I once had a lively discussion with Bill Green, the head of stewardship in the UCC, about talking about sacrifice as one of the reasons people give to the church. Bill was pretty adamant in *not* talking about stewardship in terms of sacrifice. It's kind of ironic, because we, as affluent North Americans, have so much to give. Yet, only a handful of us tithe our money, our time, or ourselves. It's something to strive for and to move toward, not for the sake of sacrifice itself, but as a component of the self-giving love that we are called to embody.

Gandhi enumerated what he called the Seven Social Sins, and number seven is "worship without sacrifice." I wonder if part of the reason most of us don't sacrifice for one another is that we'd rather not acknowledge the world's pain and our part in it. We try to build walls of material and emotional comfort that separate us from pain of any kind. Yet, part of the Christian journey is to open our eyes and our hearts to the suffering of the world, and then to invest ourselves in the lives of others, because that is *agape*.

"Love overcomes separation," writes Tillich, "and creates participation in which there is *more than that which the individuals involved can bring to it*. Love is the infinite which is given to the finite."¹⁴ It is in breaking down the walls that divide "us" from "them" and "me" from "you" that we find *agape*. And it is in that way also that we find the presence of God.

Amen.

¹³ Romans 12.1–2

¹⁴ Tillich, *op. cit.*, p.160.