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Agape Love

1 Corinthians 13:4-8a

Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

Love never ends. But as for prophecies, they will come to an end; as for tongues, they will cease; as for knowledge, it will come to an end.

John 15:12-15

"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 my Father.

This morning we wrap up our sermon series on LOVE as we find it in the New Testament scriptures... particularly in the Greek language which makes space for four different types of love. Our English language only has one word for love... which is used to cover our love for our friends, our parents, our spouses, and of course our love for tacos! Two weeks ago, we spoke of *Eros* or romantic love that we celebrate on Valentines day.... We spoke of God's good gift of sexuality and our call to use it well... in a way that honors us and our partner. Last week, we explored the love of family and friends, as we delved into *Storge* and *Philio* loves. We spoke of the bond and relationships that are life giving and supportive, ones that we find in our social communities, but especially within the life of the local church community.

This week, our focus shifts to the last of the four loves – and the one that many would name as the most important – and most challenging – of our Christian faith... *AGAPE* love. While the others are very heavy on emotion, agape is more than feeling, it is action. It is living

in a way that is for the benefit of another individual. It's based in what we know as the Golden Rule... Do unto others as you would want them to do unto you... which is a restatement of Jesus' teaching to "Love God and love your neighbor as yourself." This lesson is based on the Hebrew scriptures, "Love your neighbor" where the Hebrew word is *Ahavah*. But the language Jesus spoke and taught in was a cousin of Hebrew, that is Aramaic, in which the word for love is *Rakhmah*. But then, as Jesus' followers spread his teaching around the world, they translated them into Greek, using the word *Agape*. These early followers of Jesus, who wrote the books of the New Testament, as they were translating from Aramaic to Greek, they didn't learn the meaning of the words by looking them up in ancient dictionaries and lexicons, they looked to the teachings of Jesus and the story of his life to redefine their very concept of love.

When Jesus was asked what was the most important law in the Jewish scripture, and he said to "Love the Lord your God with all your heart... and to love your neighbor as yourself." So which is most important? Loving God, or loving your neighbor? Jesus' answer is YES! To ask the question, means you don't get his point. For Jesus, they are two sides of the same coin. Your love for God will be expressed by your love for people, and vice versa. They are inseparable... Your love for God results in a way of life that is loving to your neighbors. So this *agape* love is not something you feel... but something you DO. It's action.

Jesus lived these principles out in his life and ministry! He was constantly helping and serving people around him in very practical and tangible ways. And he consistently moved TOWARD poor and hurting people, who couldn't benefit him in any way. He showed love for the forgotten ones... the ones who usually fall through the cracks. And Jesus didn't come by this self-giving love on his own, but was living out the love and intentions in the heart of God. So Christian faith involves trusting that at the center of the universe is a being overflowing with love for the world. Which means that the purpose of our lives is to receive this love, which we've seen experienced and expressed through Jesus' life and teachings, and then to give it back out to others, creating an ecosystem of others-focused self-giving love. AGAPE!

Please know that the irony is not lost on me that as I speak of this AGAPE, self-giving love, our denominational body is suffering in the wake of an incredibly unloving outcome of General Conference. Our denomination sent a global message this week – which has been blasting from social media and secular news networks, here and abroad - that not all people are equally respected and valued in the church. At General Conference this week in St. Louis, Missouri, they passed a regressive and punitive plan that leaves no room for those who interpret scripture differently, harms gay and lesbian people and their families, diminishes the witness of the church and seeks to push not only progressives, but likely many centrists, out of the church.

The Traditional Plan which was approved by a slim margin of 55 to 45% reaffirmed the existing language in our Book of Discipline, which states that the "practice of homosexuality is incompatible with Christian teaching." It sharpened the prohibitions of pastors from

marrying or our churches from hosting same-sex weddings. In addition, the passed legislation added mandatory penalties to the Discipline so that any pastor who officiates at a same-sex marriage is to be suspended without pay for a year. On a second offense they will be defrocked. Bishops, too, have mandatory penalties for disobeying the Discipline. The policy passed at General Conference treats gay and lesbian Christians as second class. "You are people of sacred worth, but so long as you wish to share your life and love with another, you are in living in sin."

But I tell you... the sin that fills our churches and our world is not found in any true expression of love, but in the failure to love. The God who forms us loves us as we are and calls us to recognize God's reflection in one another, and embrace one-another, even as God embraces us. The legislation passed hurt the LGBTQ community and this includes some of my family and many of my friends. So let me be very clear about a couple of things: I will not treat my gay and lesbian, transgender, or queer people as second class. I will not quietly accept the way *backwards* as an acceptable way for us to live together as United Methodists. I have said it before, and I stick to it, even in the light of this General Conference vote... if I am asked to preside over a same-sex wedding for our congregation, I will even if it means I am defrocked as a United Methodist.

The love we need and are called to at this time is the same love that Jesus lived out, and called us to as well. It is AGAPE love. It is God's love incarnate... lived out in OUR everyday lives, whether there is any benefit to us as individuals or not. It is God's powerful love that lives and abides in you and in us. The love that proclaims good news to the poor, that sets prisoners free, that gives sight to the blind, that stands with the oppressed, that cancels debts. The love that heals, that turns over tables, that forgives, that overcomes any and all obstacles in its way. The movement lead by Martin Luther King, Jr. gives us an example of what this complete agape love looks like in context. Hear these words from Dr. King on what agape love of enemy looks like:

To our most bitter opponents we say: "We shall match your capacity to inflict suffering by our capacity to endure suffering. We shall meet your physical force with soul force. Do to us what you will, and we shall continue to love you. We cannot in all good conscience obey your unjust laws, because noncooperation with evil is as much a moral obligation as is cooperation with good. Throw us in jail, and we shall still love you. Send your hooded perpetrators of violence into our community at the midnight hour and beat us and leave us half dead, and we shall still love you. But be ye assured that we will wear you down by our capacity to suffer. One day we shall win freedom, but not only for ourselves. We shall so appeal to your heart and conscience that we shall win you in the process, and our victory will be a double victory."

That is love that drives out fear. That is agape love, empowered by the Holy Spirit, and embodied in the world. This agape love is not reserved for spiritual giants or social movement leaders—it is for and with and in you.

That is the call on us today: To be deeply rooted in agape love and boldly active in agape love, experiencing the love of God in such powerful ways that our lives simply radiate it back out in all we do, all we say, and all we are. At this time in our world, our nation... and our denomination...we need to soak in the love of God, allow it to fill us up, so that we might be used as tools of God's liberating agape love for such a time as this! May God's agape love be in you and work through you as we continue the fight for justice and inclusion and love! May it be so. Amen.