

February 26, 2017: Love, Agape, and Interness



Good morning! It is a tremendous honor to speak to you this morning. I am so very grateful to the Pastor Naulty for inviting me to preach. I would also like to thank David Henritzky for helping me prepare for the service this morning. I learn so much by writing and delivering sermons. It is truly a blessing from God to have this opportunity to serve in this way. My sermon this morning is entitled Love, Agape and Interness. Today, I plan to explore what it means to be Christians by studying these three powerful words. Please join me in a prayer from Psalm 19:14 in the King James Version of the Bible: Let the words of my mouth, and the meditation of my heart, be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, my strength and redeemer.

Today is Transfiguration Sunday in which we recognize a pivotal event in Christianity symbolizing the moment when humanity meets God. Jesus takes Peter, James and John to, what many believe was Mount Tabor. When they were on the mountain Jesus was "transfigured" and his face became bright like the Sun and his clothes became white like a light. At about the same time Elijah and Moses appear and Jesus speaks with them and they disappear. This event signifies that Jesus is the connecting point and human voice of God on earth.

Today, I would like to discuss something Jesus (the Voice of God) said, when asked about the most important Scriptures, in Mark 12:30-31: Jesus states that the most important Scripture is "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength." He goes on to say that the second most important Scripture is "Love your neighbor as yourself." He concludes by saying that "There is no greater commandment than these." As Christians struggling to live the life God calls us to live, it is essential that we reflect on the importance of these words from the "Voice of God" Jesus Christ. Clearly, Christ is telling us that the most important thing Christians can do is love God and others. However, what does love really mean in Christianity?

The Greeks had four words to describe what we call Love. The first three words were "Eros" which referred to "romantic" love; "Phileo" which referred to "friendship" love; and, "Stergein" which referred to the love of "family or community." However, the most powerful type of love is "Agape" love which refers to loving someone else as much as we love our self.

God calls each of us to demonstrate this self-sacrificing Agape Love for God by "loving the Lord with all of our heart, mind and soul." God also calls each of us to demonstrate Agape love with each other by "loving our neighbors as much as we love ourselves."

It is important to internalize the fact that God does not ask us to do more than he has done for us. Many consider John 3:16 to be the best known and most important Scripture. This Scripture reads: "God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son that whoever believes in Him shall not perish but have everlasting life."

Imagine how powerful the Agape Love has to be to influence you to sacrifice your child for the good of humanity. Anyone who loves a child knows how difficult this type of sacrifice would be. Most parents would find it easier to sacrifice themselves than their children.

It is important to understand that God is not asking us to sacrifice our children. God is simply asking us to first Love God with our mind, body and spirit and second to love each other as much as we love ourselves. This does not seem to be so difficult to do. However, Agape Love is in short supply in this world.

Unfortunately, God's simple requests throughout the Bible to demonstrate Agape Love are being ignored by people throughout this world. In fact, it seems that most people love themselves more than God and each other. It is disturbing that in our own communities we are seeing daily demonstrations of hate for people instead of the love of God and others that Jesus calls us to demonstrate.

It is frankly ridiculous that someone hates another person because they voted for or against someone in an election or they are LGBT or they are from some other country or they pollute the environment. Yet many of us have deleted Facebook friends or even lost good friends because they voted one way or another or made a statement that we found offensive.

As many of you know, my Father Reverend Gilbert H. Caldwell was a Civil Rights Movement "foot soldier" who knew and marched with Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and other leaders. My Mother Grace Dungee Caldwell, like many other women at the time, was one of the many Civil Rights Movement "home soldiers" who supported the marches by supporting their husbands and taking care of their children at home. I think that it is important to state that women of the "Movement" are often overlooked but they should be celebrated as heroes too!!!

As we celebrate Black History this month and throughout the year it is important to remember that this social transformation was not just about equal rights. It was a social action focused on turning the "hate" for people because of their race into the "love" of people who are different. There were, and still are, those people who think that civil and human rights would be further along if there were more violent demands for social change.

However, children of God know deep down in their hearts that you cannot promote love for others through violence. Hating others never has and never will bring about sustainable change. Change will only come about when you demonstrate such a deep and non-judgmental love for others that they can see themselves through you.

Let me say this in another way - if you want someone to change and become more sensitive to others then you have to demonstrate such a deep and non-judgmental love for them that they have no choice but to see themselves through the mirror of your soul. If you truly have Agape Love in your heart then others will change simply because they see God through you! Defriending them on Facebook, refusing to talk to them or

bad mouthing them is simply an ineffective way for children of God to deal with disagreement.

Many of you know the description of love in 1 Corinthians 13 which reads: "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."

Is your love for others patient? Does it supersede disagreement?

Is your love kind? Is it manifested by your benevolence?

Is your love boastful or arrogant? Do you give love only to people who think or act the way you do?

Is your love resentful? Do you dislike those who do things differently?

Does your love rejoice in the truth? Do you celebrate God's truth by your actions?

Can your love endure all things? Will you love someone even though they have different political beliefs?

There is a reason why 1 Corinthians 13 is the most popular Scripture read at weddings. It provides powerful guidance on what true love should look like. I encourage you to read and reread this passage to make sure that the love you give every day is from God and not popular culture.

As we heard this morning in 1 John 4:12-13: "...if we love one another God lives in us, and his love is perfected in us. By this we know that we abide in him and he in us because he has given us of His Spirit." This is an important Scripture because it reminds us that if we demonstrate true Agape Love then God lives in us. It also tells us that the Holy Spirit will guide us and help us demonstrate this love.

As many of you know, I have written two books on the Holy Spirit. The first was called Fruit of the Spirit Poems and Hymns and the second is Fruit of the Spirit Hymnal and Calendar. I find that I learn best when I am writing so I embarked on these books to learn more about the role of the Holy Spirit in life. This was my personal Sunday School ☺ This research taught me that the only way to live the life that God calls us to live is try to demonstrate each of the nine elements of the Holy Spirit as described in Galatians 5:22-23. This passage states that the Fruit of the Spirit is Love, Joy, Peace, Longsuffering, Kindness, Goodness, Faith, Meekness and Self-Control.

One of the most amazing things that I learned in my research is that Love is the foundation of the Holy Spirit and the eight other elements are components of Love. In short, the only way to allow the Holy Spirit to be manifested within us is to demonstrate Agape Love. It is easy to say that we should all demonstrate Agape Love every minute of every day. But how should we do it?

I got some answers to this question several years ago when I wrote a book called "Intelligent Influence." In doing research on this book I learned three very important things.

First, we are all products of our influence. "We do what we do, think the way we think and accomplish what we accomplish because of influence."

Second, the secret of personal and business success is developing "Empathy" which I define as the ability to understand other people's perspectives. My consulting firm is built around a four-step "Intelligent Influence" process that helps people develop "Empathy" in business, government, schools, police departments and even churches.

Third, there is a process that everyone must go through to develop Empathy and then Agape Love. I call this process "The Ladder of Love."

Several years ago I took my church youth group to the Museum of Tolerance in New York City. It is an amazing museum that has some incredible exhibits on both the Holocaust and the Civil Rights Movement. However, I was bothered by the term "Tolerance." It is not acceptable for children of God to just tolerate others. The Bible tells us that we have to demonstrate Agape Love and love others as themselves. In reflecting on "Agape Love", "Empathy" and "Tolerance" I realized that as imperfect human beings we have to go through a six stage process to develop "Agape Love." I have learned that we each respond to different people according to one of these six stages. God knows that we are imperfect. However, God is calling us to try to move to the "Agape Love" stage with every person in our life.

I want you to envision a ladder that I call the "Ladder of Love" that goes all the way up to Heaven with just six rungs or steps. Every step you take on the rungs of the ladder brings you closer to Heaven.

The first rung of the ladder represents "Intolerance." This word is defined as an "unwillingness or refusal to tolerate or respect opinions or beliefs contrary to one's own." Whether we choose to admit it or not, most of us are intolerant of one or more individuals or groups of individuals.

As distasteful as it may be, God calls us to demonstrate Agape Love to even the most reprehensible people in the world. However, since we are imperfect human beings this is difficult so we have to make an effort to at least move our view of people from intolerance to the second rung of the "Ladder of Love" which I call "Tolerance." "Tolerance" is defined as "a permissive attitude toward those whose opinions, beliefs, practices, racial origins differ from their own." This sounds good but you can tolerate others but still disrespect them.

The third rung of the "Ladder of Love" is "Concern" which is defined as "being of interest or importance to." This is clearly better than tolerance but it is not as powerful as "Empathy."

Consequently, the fourth rung of the "Ladder of Love" is "Empathy" which is defined as the "identification with or vicarious experiencing of the feelings, thoughts, or attitudes of another." In studying the manifestation of empathy, I discovered that in some instances there can be an arrogance to empathy. For some people, empathy means that "I identify with your "little" problems."

I therefore realized that it was essential to identify a fifth secular rung of the "Ladder of Love" and there was no term that adequately described this stage. I therefore created the term "Interness" which is defined as "respecting someone who is different as much as one appreciates themselves." Interness prepares people to move to the Agape Love stage that God calls us to demonstrate. If we cannot respect others as much as we respect ourselves then we cannot "love our neighbors as ourselves" as Jesus calls us to do in the sixth and final rung of the Ladder of Love.

This sixth rung is the "Agape Love" stage which is defined as "the highest form of love manifested in the love of God for human beings and human beings for both God and all God's children." When we are demonstrating Agape Love we have a foot in Heaven. The amazing thing is that by demonstrating Agape Love we are not just demonstrating our faith in God. We are experiencing a deep happiness that defies all understanding.

It is no accident that Jesus said that the two most important commandments are to "love God with your mind, body and soul" and to "love others as you love yourself." The real "secret" of life is that true happiness comes from demonstrating Agape Love to God and others.

I encourage you to try it. Whenever you are feeling down or struggling through the inevitable problems of life take some time to demonstrate your Agape Love of God through prayer and your Agape Love of others through your selfless respect of everyone you interact with.

Don't worry about your problems. Just share your Agape Love and I promise you will find a happiness that defies all understanding.

Let us pray!

Dear God, we are so very grateful for the Agape Love you have given us throughout our entire lives. Please help us to open our hearts to allow the Holy Spirit to empower us to share our Agape Love with every person we interact with on a daily basis. Teach us how to ask ourselves if we are demonstrating Intolerance, Tolerance, Concern, Empathy, Interness or Agape Love as we strive to live the wonderful life that you call us to live. Embolden us to help others see the importance of moving through the "Ladder of Love" so that they too can experience true happiness by sharing Agape Love every minute of every day. In your name we pray. Amen.