

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God, our Father, and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen. In last week's Gospel lesson from John 15, Jesus said, "I am the vine. You are the branches. If a man remains in me and I, in him, he will bear much fruit. Continuing that text this week, our Gospel lesson for today identifies what that fruit is. It is the fruit of love. Jesus says, "As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Now abide or remain in my love." Love. Now, there's a word that's vastly overused in our culture today, so much so that its true meaning has, at best, become completely trivialized. In our world and in our culture, we use that word, love, for many different things. Now, if we knew a little Greek, we could be more precise.

The Greek language distinguishes at least four different kinds of love, words that we translate as love, all using four different Greek words, but in English, we refer to each of those four different kinds of love with the same word, love. First, there is the Greek word, *storge*. This is a warm and fuzzy love. We might think of it in terms of nostalgia, the American flag and apple pie, pictures in the old photo album of the family gathered around the Christmas tree. For me, it's the sights and sounds of county Stadium in Milwaukee in the 1950s when my grandpa would take me to see a Milwaukee Braves baseball game, the sight of bright, white uniforms set against a field of freshly mowed, green grass and a rich, blue sky. The sounds of the roar of the crowd and the crack of the bat. How I loved going to the ballpark with my grandpa. That's *storge* love.

Another Greek word that we translate love is *philos*, P-H-I-L-O-S, and that's the word from which the city of Philadelphia gets its name, the city of brotherly love. It's a word that has to do with the bond of true and trusted friendship. Maybe you've had, or maybe you have a friend like that, someone who is more than an acquaintance, someone you call a true friend. My grandma used to say there are big ships and small ships, but the best ship of all is friendship. Friendship, brotherly love. That's *Philos*. Third, there's the Greek word, *Eros*. And once again in English, we translate that word as love. Our English word, erotic, is derived from *eros*. It has to do with the intimacy and passion of romantic love. Yes, sexual love. Now, our minds might immediately think of that type of love as something wrong or perverted.

If you think of it only in the way that our culture today totally misrepresents it, it is, but in the proper context of marriage between a man and a woman, *eros* is certainly not wrong at all. It is God-given and something wonderful. Then, the fourth Greek word for love, and the one that we'll focus in specifically this morning, is the one used most often in the Bible and the one used in our Gospel lesson and our Epistle lesson for today, and it's the word, *agape*. Looking ahead, next Sunday is Mother's Day, and the love of a mother for her child can be most

helpful in our understanding. The unconditional and self-sacrificing love that is agape. By God's design, a mother literally pours out her heart to her child and sacrifices her own needs and comforts for her child's welfare. There is virtually nothing that could cause her to not love her child. Thanks be to God for giving us mothers who love us with an agape-type love.

A week ahead of the fact, Happy Mother's Day to all of you moms here this morning, and thank you for fulfilling God's design for you and for the example of agape-type love that you provide, but even then, no mom in reality is the perfect mom and can agape perfectly, and therefore, the agape type love they exemplify isn't truly and fully agape, because true agape love is a perfect love, and it is the love we simply can't completely comprehend or appreciate. Why is that? Because we simply can't comprehend God, and in last week's Epistle lesson from 1 John 4, we were told that God is love. God is agape. He is the source of and the ultimate expression of what love truly means and is. Agape is the perfect love that is God himself, a completely unconditional, no-strings-attached love. A love for a world that doesn't even care, that by nature is so loveless and unloving, that it does not and cannot even desire or seek his love, but God loves anyway. He can't help himself, because God is love.

It's God's essence to love. Agape is not something that's simply warm and fuzzy. It's not nostalgia. It's not affection or a bond of friendship. It's not a romantic impulse. Those are feelings, and in our English language and in our culture today, the same word, love, describes them all, but agape, the Greek word which we also translate as love, is not a feeling. It's an action, an action that rises up out of God's perfect and holy will, and where do we find that agape love in action? John 3:16 says that God so loved the world in the true agape sense of the word, that he gave his only son. We see God's agape love in action on the cross; bleeding, dying, forgiving the sins of the world, loving the world to death, because God's agape love is a love that lays down its life for the loveless, for the unlovable, for those who couldn't care less for the world, for you, and for me.

Again, in last week's Epistle lesson from 1 John 4, we heard John say, "In this is agape, in this is love. Not that we loved God, but that he first loved us, and gave his son, Jesus Christ, as a propitiation and atoning sacrifice for our sins." It is this perfect agape love that prompted the father to send the son, and it is this perfect agape love that prompted the son to do his father's will, to be obedient to his father, obedient even to death on a cross. God's perfect agape love is the self-sacrificing love that the father has for the son, and it is the self-sacrificing love that the Son Jesus has for his disciples, and that includes you and me. Jesus says, in today's gospel, "As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. You are loved with Jesus agape love, a perfect love, an unconditional love, a love you didn't deserve, a love

you cannot earn." But then in verse 12 of our text, Jesus says, "This is my commandment. Love one another as I have loved you."

Jesus commands us to love one another with the same self-sacrificing agape love. Jesus gives this as a commandment, and when we think of commandments, we think of the ten commandments and God's law, and we immediately come back to the realization that we are unable to keep any of God's commandments. We've broken them all. Feelings of guilt and shame may come flooding back in, because the law is a burden to us. Our inability to keep God's command causes us to fear his wrath and anger against sin, but John says in our epistle lesson for today that Jesus' command for us to love one another is not burdensome, and it's not burdensome because it is given in the light of his agape love. This is love. Not that we love God, but that he loved us and sent his son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins. In the sacrifice of the cross, the burden of the law was removed, removed from our shoulders and placed squarely on Jesus as he bled and died to take upon himself the penalty that all our sin deserved.

It is only in that perfect, atoning sacrifice that his agape love can be seen, known, and then shared. Jesus doesn't command us simply to love one another. That wouldn't do it. We wouldn't do it. We can't do it. Because of our sinful nature, our love is turned inward, not outward. Our love is selfish, not selfless like God's agape love. Jesus doesn't command us to simply love one another, but instead his command is to love one another as I have loved you. God's love came first, and it now is in us. It's only when we are loved and filled by God's amazing agape love that we can love with a love that is not our own, with a love that doesn't come from within us, but comes from the one who is in us, from God's perfect love in Christ Jesus, and it is in and through that love, his love, that we are able to love one another. The apostle, Paul, paints a picture of agape love in chapter 13 of his first letter to the Corinthians.

That text is often used at weddings, but the original context is the body of Christ, the church. It's a description of the agape love that Christ had for us that now fills us and that is now also to be lived out among us. The love that Jesus commands us to have for one another. Listen how Paul describes agape love. "Love is patient and kind. It is not jealous or boastful. It is not arrogant or rude. Love does not insist on its own way. It is not irritable or resentful. It does not rejoice at wrong, but rejoices in the right. Love, agape love, bears all things, trusts all things, hopes all things, patiently endures all things. That's what Jesus had in mind when he says, "This is my command. Love one another as I have loved you." He doesn't say "like one another" or "have affection for one another." Those are feelings. You can't command a feeling. You can't say, "I command you to have warm, fuzzy feelings,"

but you can command agape love, because you don't just feel agape love. You do agape love. Agape love is love in action.

We are to agape one another with that same self-sacrificing agape that Jesus Christ demonstrated to us. Husbands agape your wives, the way Christ agaped the church and gave himself up for her. Moms and dads agape, your children, children agape your parents, disciples of our Lord Jesus Christ, chosen, baptized, believing agape one another. Agape your neighbor. Love them. Your coworker, your fellow student, your teacher, your boss, not because they are necessarily lovable, not because they loved you first, but because Christ loved you first. In John 13, Jesus says, "By this, all people will know that you are my disciples if you have love for one another." Christ's agape love in us is how the world knows that we belong to Him, to Jesus. It's that agape love that caused the world to sit up and take notice as those first believers, those first Christians lived in that first century after the first Pentecost. For those first Christians, it wasn't the impressive buildings that the world was attracted or stood up and took notice of. Christians, at that time, worshiped in their homes, and the pagan temples, at that time, were far more impressive.

It wasn't the airtight body of doctrine that they had developed that had not been fully developed yet. Nothing had really truly been written down in that first years after Pentecost. What impressed the world at that time was the love those first Christians had for each other and for others in spite of everything, in spite of even being persecuted because of their faith in Jesus Christ. They'd never seen love like that before, and no disciple of Jesus can say, "I don't have this love to give." You have it. You have it. You may or may not use it all the time, and God still forgives you when you don't always use it properly, but it's there. You have it because you are one of God's chosen. In verse 16 of our text, Jesus says, "You did not choose me, but I chose you." Notice, again, that it's all his doing, not ours. Before you ever believed in him, before you ever were, because of his agape love, he chose you to be his own and to receive his love.

But then, notice also that he chose you for a purpose. As that verse continues, "You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you to go and bear fruit." Again, in last week's gospel lesson, we saw Jesus as the vine and we as the branches, and branches join to the vine, produce fruit, and that fruit is love. That fruit is agape. Do you see the chain? Agape produces agape. Love produces love. The Father loved the son. The son loved you. You are the next link. You remain or abide in Jesus' love by fulfilling his command to love others. And finally, in verse 11 of our text, Jesus says, "I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete." The Apostle, Paul, reflects that thought so well in Philippians 2, when he says, "So, if there is any encouragement in Christ, any

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comfort from love, any participation in the spirit, any affection and sympathy, make my joy complete by being of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord, and of one mind."

The wonderful byproduct of the agape love we have received from God in Christ Jesus that is ours as we obey his command to love one another is joy. In fact, that word itself is the perfect acronym to describe what we've been talking about here this morning. Joy, J-O-Y. J is for Jesus. He's always first, and his agape love always comes first. The O is for others. That's the one anothering Jesus calls us to practice in our text, and then last, and properly least, the why is for you. Jesus, then others, and then you. May each of you be filled with an extra measure of that wonderful, Jesus, others, you, joy, as God's agape love continues to work in you, and then as it also works through you into the lives of others. Amen. And now may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, guard and keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus now and to all eternity. Amen.