

Sixth Sunday of Easter  
Wicker Park Lutheran Church  
Rev. Jason Glombicki  
May 6, 2018

Today's readings were full of one central word: love. To my knowledge, there is only one other place that talks about love more than the church, and that's pop music. As we step into the wedding season, we might see a couple slowly dance to Whitney Houston's "I Will Always Love You," or we might dance to Rihanna's "We Found Love," or perhaps we'll always remember Elvis Presley's "Can't Help Falling in Love."

With all this talk about love, it's worth clarifying what Jesus said about love. In John's gospel, the Greek word used for love in today's reading was "agape," which is a specific type of love. This type of love has often been described as charitable, selfless, altruistic, and unconditional. However, in our contemporary culture these words tend to carry different meaning than the intention of *agape*. A better way to translate *agape* would be a love that "has a preference for, well wish toward, or regard for the welfare of" an individual. It's the type love that creates goodness in the world.<sup>1</sup> Are with me?

Before we get too deep, let's recall the context of this *agape* love. In John, today's passage is a part of a long dialogue on the night before Jesus was handed over to the authorities. Jesus had already given the disciples a new command to love one another, which was symbolized in the washing of the feet. Following this action, Jesus began talking, and talking, and talking... longer than my sermons... but it's Jesus so I can't argue with him too much. Anyway, Jesus told his

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<sup>1</sup> Thayer, Joseph Henry. *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*, being Grimm's Wilke's Clavis Novi Testamenti, translated, revised, and enlarged. Corrected edition. New York: American Book Company, 1889.

disciples, “This is my commandment, that you *agape* one another as I have *agaped* you.” What strikes me in this statement is that God’s action comes first before his command. Jesus said, “Hey, I’ve already given you my preference. You’re my friends. I care about you. So, if you too care about me, then the best thing you can do is give special treatment to one another.”

I can’t help but pause when I think of Jesus’s request to give preferential treatment. First off, even if I hate to admit it publically, I don’t like everyone. I don’t want to treat that jerk with well-intentions. I’d rather never see that schmuck again after what she did to me. And, if I favor everyone, doesn’t that dilute the preference? I’d prefer to keep my preferential cohort small, avoiding those I dislike and hoping they go away. Yet, that’s not what Jesus said.

Remember that shortly before Jesus said this *agape* statement, Judas left the room to sell Jesus to the authorities. I can imagine that the disciples were angry at Judas for what happened. And in that time of crisis, they didn’t choose to give each other the benefit of the doubt. Rather, the disciples threw each other under the preverbal bus and cower in their own corner. The separation from one another was so great that, three times, Peter denied knowing Jesus and, in Matthew’s gospel, Judas died by suicide.

But, I wonder if it would have been different if the disciples took Jesus’s command seriously. What if instead of running away from each other they came together? What if they *agaped* each other and found a way to respond to the situation? I wonder if Judas would have gone on to share the transformational news of Jesus’s resurrection if only the disciples took Jesus’s statement seriously.

While we’ll never know what could have been, what we do know is that our God first loves us with fondness and favor. I don’t know about you, but when I’m in a situation that feels uncertain or scary, I feel empowered when I know that someone is supporting me. So, knowing

that God favors me just the way I am before I do anything at all, that's encouraging. It's in that emboldened state of being that I can respond to God's *agape* with *agape*. But what exactly might that *agape* look like?

As we enter the month of May, I'm reminded that it is "mental health month." Statistically, 1 in 5 Americans, that's nearly 60 million people, face the day-to-day reality of living with a mental health condition.<sup>2</sup> Failing to intervene with treatment and support have meant that suicide is the second leading cause of death among people ages 10-34 and the fourth leading cause for ages 35 to 54. In 2016, there were twice as many suicides than there were homicides, and the trends across the board show that suicide is on the rise.<sup>3</sup> It doesn't help that people with mental illness are more likely to be bullied and become the victims of violence due to misunderstandings and stigma.<sup>4</sup> So, I wonder what would it look like for us to hear Jesus's words from today's gospel speaking to this reality? Could we begin to see those with mental illness as those we could favor? Might we wish them well with words and actions?<sup>5</sup>

One of the first ways we can respond to God's *agape* with *agape* is to help embrace a stigma-free culture. We can avoid using language like "crazy" or "challenged." We can see the person, and not the condition, by using "people first" language. So, instead of saying "she's bipolar," we might say "she's living with bipolar disorder."<sup>6</sup>

With this in mind and in an effort to promote a supportive culture for those with mental illness, we will display a string of green cloths outside our building, as green in the color identified

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.nami.org/Learn-More/Mental-Health-By-the-Numbers>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/statistics/suicide.shtml>

<sup>4</sup> <https://cmhadurham.ca/finding-help/the-myth-of-violence-and-mental-illness/>

<sup>5</sup> To read the ELCA's message on Mental Illness visit

[http://download.elca.org/ELCA%20Resource%20Repository/Mental\\_IllnessSM.pdf?\\_ga=2.195893164.181265492.1525139788-626650931.1486180767](http://download.elca.org/ELCA%20Resource%20Repository/Mental_IllnessSM.pdf?_ga=2.195893164.181265492.1525139788-626650931.1486180767)

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.nami.org/getattachment/Extranet/Education-Training-and-Outreach-Programs/Outreach-and-Advocacy/NAMI-FaithNet/NAMIFaithnet-StigmaFree2Pager.pdf>

with mental health. To help us prepare this statement and raise awareness, during the next hymn there will be an extended introduction and you'll be invited to take the green strip of cloth you received and tie it onto a rope that will be placed down the center aisle. After today's service, we'll display the rope on our fence outside with a sign to raise awareness. We pray that this will be the first step in living out Christ's *agape* toward one another.

You see, today's Gospel is about creating a new language of love as the standard. It's not a pop music kind of love; rather it's about a love that invites us to more fully be in relationship with all people. It's a love that recognizes that our God first gave us preferential treatment, and it's a love that encourages us to return that love with the same kind of love for all the world. For in this love, we shall find new life this day and always. Amen.