

Wicker Park Lutheran Church

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“I have loved you.”

“Abide in my love.”

“Love one another.”

Jesus’s focus was on love in today’s gospel reading. When we hear the word “love,” we need to ask the question, “what kind of love?” You see, the ancient Greeks had 8 different types of love that we bundle together into the one word in English. Each different type had different foci—from erotic, to playful, to familial, obsessive, and, even, self-love. In the New Testament or Christian Scriptures, we generally see four types of love—eros, philia, storge, and agape. In today’s reading, however, only one type is mentioned, that is agape.

Why does this matter? Well, Jesus noted a unique association between God and humankind. In Jesus’s time, a common relationship was that of a patron and a client. It was a hierarchical connection where the patron had more wealth, power, and prestige so that they could help or do favors for the client. In return, the client supported the patron in war, political campaigns, and other needs. It’s an “I’ll scratch your back and you scratch mine” kind of relationship. It’s a friendship out of obligation or necessity, but this is NOT what Jesus describes.

So that we can clarify the difference, let’s see try another poll using the link on the screen. Go to that link tree and select “share (worship poll).” You’ll need to type in a single word at a time to describe a characteristic of true friendship. Especially how

it might look different from the client-patron paradigm. In friendship, you might experience mutuality, a shared sense of connection, shared experiences or outlooks, and many more. You see, Jesus is setting up a very different way of understanding the relationship between God and humankind. In contrast with the patron-client relationship, this is a relationship of mutuality. It's a relationship that is born out of Christ's call to join in a shared outlook, a shared vision for the world, and a shared sense of agape.

According to today's gospel, agape is the love that God showed to Jesus, agape is what Jesus displayed towards his disciples, and then, agape is what the disciples are encouraged to share with each other. As one scholar puts it, "When [the disciples] love in this way, their love becomes impregnated with divine qualities." It's a love that is self-sacrificing. But not in a way that calls you to be something that you're not. Rather, agape love is about calling you to become more fully who God has called you to be. That is, to embody God's truth. To act with loving generosity. To look towards the well-being of the others. To kneel with a towel at the washbowl to reveal an ego-emptying kind of love.

That's a tall order in the midst of a culture that prioritizes the self. Far too often we ask, "what can I get out of it?" But agape challenges us to ask, "how might I share the love I've received?" Because, that's what following Christ is about.

One place that we can bring about God's agape is in our acknowledgement of privilege. That is, we can begin to put aside the self and exchange it for God's agape love in the times when we realize the advantages we have been given, through no

effort of our own. Another way to put that is when we acknowledge our privilege. Whether it's the privilege of being male, or white, or straight, or an American citizen, or able-bodied, or say, having access to a free COVID vaccine. These are all advantages in our national and global context that give us a "leg up" on others. Once we acknowledge that we have these advantages, then we can begin to imagine how we might give of the self to demand that all might receive that access, participation, engagement, and abundant life found within these privileges. It is similar to what we saw in today's gospel when Jesus was loved by God and then shared it with the disciples. It's a flowing down of power and access. It's sharing not storing. It's looking toward the well-being of the other.

This way of being, that is giving up the self, quickly became the hallmark for followers of Christ. It was a leveling of hierarchy and the sharing for the benefit of all that were the foundations of the early church. This process and realization is what we witnessed in today's reading from Acts—namely, that the gifts of God were not only for the Jewish believers but that the gifts were given for the Gentiles as well.

Agape love is about recognizing that we are all one collective. It's a love that desires another's highest good. It's a love that is unconditional. It's a love that was fully expressed in Jesus literally giving his life for his friends.

While Jesus took agape to the extreme by dying for his friends that isn't the only way to share agape. We are not all called to kill ourselves, but rather we are encouraged to live towards agape. For some of us who are parents, or on this

Mother's Day perhaps a mother, you might attempt to step into the selfless, unconditional love each day as you fiercely love your children giving them all you have and expecting nothing in return. If you're not a parent, we embody God's agape as we generously give of our time and money to the church or other non-profits expecting nothing in return- for example, through our offerings and our gifts to the Lenten Project. Still, some might see this agape love lived out in striving for justice for all, even while knowing that they might need to surrender or give up the privilege or power they've come on worship. Or, the agape love shared by nurses, doctors, and first responders as they put their life on the line during the pandemic to care for COVID patients far before a vaccine was a reality. The list could go on.

You see, agape, simply put, means giving of the self in love. In today's gospel, we're reminded that we are all called to share in Christ's friendship that empowers us to give up some of our self-interest for the good of all of creation. And we do that not to repay or to buy God's love. Rather, we do it because we have been loved. That is, we love in response to love. We agape because God has agaped us. Amen.