

Seventh Sunday after The Epiphany, Year C
A Sermon Preached by The Rev Ian M Delinger
on February 23, 2025

Genesis 45:3-11, 15 / Psalm 37:1-12, 41-42 / 1 Corinthians 15:35-38,42-50 / Luke 6:27-38

*May the words of my mouth, and the meditations of all our hearts
be acceptable in Your sight, O God, our strength and our redeemer.*

Last week, I explored a theology of hate, so it's only right and proper that this week we explore together Jesus' call for us to *love* and God's unconditional love through Jesus Christ. And I shall spend just as much time exploring love as I did exploring hate.

The topping and tailing of today's readings cannot be a mere coincidence. The drafters of the Lectionary chose an OT reading that illustrates Jesus' call for us to love our enemies. Joseph was sold into slavery by his older brothers, who then told their father that Joseph had died. Years later, during an extended famine, Joseph reveals to his brothers – in this story – his identity and his high-ranking position. Not only does Joseph say to his brothers, "*Hey! It's me!*" He arranges for them to be protected from the disasters of the famine. He *could* have continued to treat them like strangers and to be angry for what they had done to him when he was young. But he chose to love them.

Love is hard. Anyone in a marriage knows that love is hard. Anyone who has struggled through a marriage that eventually led to a divorce knows that love is hard. But love is also *weird!*

I love my mother. I love my family. I love the St Stephen's Family. I love Jesus. I love my cat. I love hanging out on the ocean's edge and the beauty of sunrises and sunsets. I also love tri-tip and a beautifully cooked thick rib-eye steak. And as one of my students from my last job continues to highlight as an oddity: I love Brussels Sprouts!

Love is *weird* because, in English, we only have one word to describe all the degrees of love that we feel. In Classical Greek, there are 7 words to describe love:

- *Eros* physical love or sexual desire¹.
- *Philia* is affectionate love, friendship².
- *Storge* is familial love³.
- *Mania* is obsessive love, like stalkers have⁴.
- *Pragma* is practical or dutiful love⁵.
- *Philautia* is love of self⁶. (Not narcissism)

The type of love that Jesus is talking about today is *ἀγάπη* or unconditional and sacrificial love⁷. It's the love that heroic people possess which enables them to sacrifice themselves to save a stranger.

Jesus says ἀγαπᾶτε your enemies. You are to have selfless, sacrificial, unconditional love toward those who hate you, those for whom you have contempt, those to whom you want to cause physical harm or vice-versa. How is that possible, and why would Jesus ask that of us?

I've gotten to the point in my life where I would just rather *ignore* my enemies. I don't hate, and I don't want to spend the negative energy required to actively hate someone. I don't need emotionally harmful people living my head rent-free! But Jesus is calling me to *selflessly love* my enemies *unconditionally*. Let's be honest, I don't want to do that, and none of you want to do that, either.

¹ Eros is the type of love that involves passion, lust, and/or romance.

² Philia is the type of love that involves friendship.

³ Storge is the natural love that family members have for one another.

⁴ Mania is the kind of "love" that a stalker feels toward their victim.

⁵ Pragma is love based on duty, obligation, or logic.

⁶ Philautia refers to how a person views themselves and how they feel about their own body and mind.

⁷ Agape is the kind of love that is felt by a person willing to do anything for another, including sacrificing themselves, without expecting anything in return. Philosophically, agape has also been defined as the selfless love that a person feels for strangers and humanity as a whole.

And who are our enemies? We all have our personal enemies, those people in our lives who, for some reason or another, are no longer friends, estranged family members, someone known to you whom you harmed or who harmed you. At Prayers & Pastries on Monday mornings, the form of prayers has the line:

[We pray] for our enemies, and those we have wronged, and all who wrong us.

Each of you know who those people are in your lives. Perhaps you have attempted reconciliation; perhaps you aren't at that place yet; perhaps reconciliation isn't possible; and maybe reconciliation just isn't worth the time and effort. That's between you, them and God, and something we can talk about in private if you wish. But you each know who those people are for you.

But *agape* is a type of love that is for all humanity, even those you don't know. So, let's just have a look at our nation. I love my country. I'm proud to be an American. I'll stand tall and put my hand on my heart as I wail out the *Star-Spangled Banner*. I *cannot* sing *America the Beautiful* because it makes me cry! I've seen everything it describes in this nation, and the lyrics of #719 in the blue *Hymnal 1982* are spot on! I have lived abroad, and I have traveled the world. I have both defended my country when verbally attacked, and I have equally been deeply ashamed. I don't want to live anywhere else. And I know that it's unpopular and uncomfortable for 60% of our country to use the term "Proud American", but I'm not going to let the White Supremacist Christian Nationalists hijack that term to apply only to them, because I may be DEI hire libtard, but I'm a Proud American, too!

And it's precisely here – in that rift – that Jesus is calling me to love: to ἀγαπᾶτε my enemies. So, how do we do that? How do we have unconditional, sacrificial love for those whom we don't know, who don't want us to exist or someone we love to exist? And we *all* either *are someone* or *love someone* who is openly under attack right now ... and not just from the Diversity, Equity and Inclusion angle, either. There are a lot of groups of people under attack in ways that we haven't seen for 5 or 6 generations. So, how do we show love for our enemies?

The Bible is supposed to be our source for inspiration on how to live a holy life, right? So, naturally, I started there. Reflecting on passages about love in the OT – where *agape* isn't used because 1) it was written in Hebrew, not Greek, and 2) there's only one word for *love* in Hebrew – but reflecting on the OT, I saw where the type of love being demanded was of the other 6 types of Classical Greek love:

- There is plenty of *Eros* in the OT! The most notable *eros* is the Song of Songs. It's all about sexual love. It only comes up twice in the Sunday Lectionary, and it's the same reading both times. So, pour yourself a glass of wine, dim the lights and read it yourself.
- *Elijah the Prophet and his protégé Elisha would be a good example of Philia.*
- *A good example of Storge familial love would be Ruth and Naomi.*
- In Genesis, the love that Jacob has for Rachel could probably be described as *Mania*.
- *For the love of self Philautia I can only think of King David, but that might be a bit off. His love for himself may be more than philautia encompasses.*
- *Pragma, practical or dutiful love, might be best characterized in the Love of God. The Love of God in the OT is really about living God's Law in all aspects of life. If you do that, that's loving God. Abraham and Sarah might be the most shining examples of Pragma.*

As you heard the definitions of these types of love, you probably thought of how each applied in your life: your first lover, your best friend, your favorite sibling, your self-esteem as you matured, and your love of your career. Hopefully none of you were stalkers, and there were no flashes to your periods of *mania*.

Agape is harder to find in the OT. I'm not an OT scholar, and if you are, please enlighten me on examples of *agape* in the OT. I thought of Noah, his wife and their sons. But they didn't let anyone else on the boat! So, unconditional, sacrificial love for humanity might not apply.

I take you through this exercise because it's been really difficult for me to fathom unconditional, sacrificial love for some individuals and groups whom I don't know but who would probably be considered my enemies. So, I'm thinking that perhaps we don't really know how to do *agape*. I can't think of an example within my own circles in which *agape* was demonstrated, but only talked about. The popular *agape* meals in parish halls in the 1990s I now understand to not really have been about *agape* at all, and probably better labeled *philia meals*. Perhaps the average person who isn't a hero is incapable of fully understanding and exhibiting *agape*. Jesus had a habit of calling His followers to live the impossible, and this may have been yet another one of those.

Jesus summarized the Law as love of God and love of neighbor. In my circles, the intellectual discussion focuses on what it might mean to love yourself in order to love your neighbor. As Libtards, "*Who is my neighbor?*" has been answered to include all people, particularly the marginalized. And last week I illustrated for you just how enraged that makes the followers of the Sin of Empathy! And while that love of neighbor is also *agape*, the demonstration of such has mostly been toward the marginalized; I've never witnessed it toward one's enemies.

So, *A Dictionary of Christian Ethics* poses the question:

In what kind of behavior must the love of God or neighbor be exhibited and its genuineness verified?

In other words, how do we know when *agape*, particularly for enemies, is happening? If you came here today to get quick answers on how to love your enemies, I'm sorry to disappoint.

But we have Jesus as our model. Jesus is the embodiment of God's love for God's people. Jesus shows us all the ways that God loves us:

- God is good to all Creation.
- God freely forgives those who repent.

- God sent Jesus “to seek and to save”.

So, our love should model the divine love by doing good to all, by forgiving as we have been forgiven, and by responding to need. Maybe loving our enemy isn't so much about actively showing that love all the time. Maybe *agape* toward your enemy is in the moment ... like in the moment Joseph revealed himself to his brothers, built up to loving in these other ways.

20C Swiss theologian Karl Barth is summarized by *A Dictionary of Christian Ethics*:

Without love to Jesus there can be no following of Jesus: without love to God there can be no obedience to God. Love is the presupposition of all else in the Christian life; and it is precisely the freedom to love both God and neighbor that is the gift of grace, the creation of God's own redeeming love in Christ.

Love must always go back to Jesus.

Agape is used in the NT for God's love for humanity and the love that believers are to have for God and one another. According to *Biblehub.com*, outside of the NT, *agape* was relatively rare in classical Greek literature.

*The writers of the NT adopted and expanded the meaning of "agapaó" to express the unique, divine love revealed in Jesus Christ.*⁸

But it seems like it's unachievable when applied to one's enemies. But it's rooted in Jesus Christ, and the love of Jesus Christ is the deepest form of love. And this is where love is *weird*, whether in English or Greek. Someone gave me a book called *Love Makes No Sense*, and in it you will find the heart of the joy and the challenge of *agape*:

⁸ <https://biblehub.com/greek/25.htm>

- *Encountering Jesus transforms the way we see the world.*
- *To encounter God in Jesus is to see everything differently.*
- *The Incarnation: God's Love is personified in Jesus*
- *This love both transforms and challenges us.*

Love makes no sense. It is unsettling, undermining, deconstructive. It turns our world upside down, challenges all our preconceptions, invites us to reconsider the whole of our lives. The absurdity of Christianity is not just that the love that makes no sense is the truth that we find in Jesus of Nazareth. The real absurdity of Christianity is the claim that that love is what we are talking about when we are talking about God Himself. God is love, and love makes no sense.

Love is hard! I think to make God's love make sense, to make *agape* of enemy make sense, we have to look further on in today's Gospel story. Eric Franklin, in his commentary on Luke's Gospel, makes an astute observation. In Jesus' *Sermon on the Plain*, which began last week with the *Blessings and Woes* and continues this week for a call for love of others and compassion for the marginalized, the Sermon on the Plain focuses on *mercy*. To Luke, says Franklin, *mercy* lies at the heart of God. And we find in today's Gospel:

Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful.

So, perhaps when I'm confronted with a mob of White Supremacist Christian Nationalists, and I see that they are in mortal danger, which I could possibly spare them from, I am to show them mercy, as Joseph showed mercy to his brothers. And through showing mercy, perhaps that would be *ἀγάπη*.

In the meantime, I shall pray as a mantra the words of today's Collect:

*Send Your Holy Spirit and pour into my heart, O God, Your greatest gift...
...which is love!*