

Christ Episcopal Church, Valdosta
“What Agape Love Looks Like” (Matthew 22:36-40)
October 25, 2020
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In the Name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Last week Bishop Logue preached about Jesus’ response to a question posed by the Pharisees, a question intended to trap him: “Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?” But Jesus was not trapped, and he responded, “Give to the emperor the things that are the emperor’s and to God the things that are God’s” (Matthew 22:17, 21). In today’s gospel passage Matthew tells us Jesus was asked yet another question by the Pharisees designed to trap him: “Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?” Jesus famously answered:

‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets (Matthew 22:37-40).

You may have read or heard this passage so many times that as soon as it was read today you began to zone out because you already know this, right? Maybe you think of this passage like a book you have already read (“I already know what happens”) or like a movie you have already seen (“I already know how it ends”) or like a sermon you have already heard (“Is he going to talk about God’s love again?”). But I encourage you to tune in, because in the same way you learn more when you reread a book, and notice more when you watch a favorite film again, you may glean something new today.

The Old Testament law has 613 commandments—so a question about which of them are the most important makes sense. In his response to the Pharisee’s question, “Which commandment in the law is the greatest?” Jesus cited two passages from that same Old Testament law. First, Jesus cites from Deuteronomy, from what is known as the Shema Israel: “Hear, O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord alone. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might” (Deuteronomy 6:4-5). In other words, the first of the greatest commandments is to love God with all you are and all you have.

Then Jesus cites a passage from Leviticus: “You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against any of your people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the Lord” (Leviticus 19:18). In other words, when it comes to your relationship with God it is all about love—and when it comes to your relationship with other people, it is all about love. We see this is same principle in the Decalogue, the Ten Commandments, as the first four commandments specify how to love God and the remaining six how to love other people. It all comes back to love, as Paul wrote in his Letter to the Romans:

The one who loves another has fulfilled the law. The commandments, “You shall not commit adultery; You shall not murder; You shall not steal; You shall not covet”; and any other commandment, are summed up in this word, “Love your neighbor as yourself.” Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law (Romans 13:8-10)

As a kid I had my clock radio on in my room pretty much all the time. While I have always been a fan of what is now known as “classic rock” from bands like the Beatles and U2 and Van Halen (rest in peace, Eddie), I also had a soft spot for sappy love songs from the 70’s and 80’s, the sappier the better, no apologies. When I was in fifth grade Bette Midler had the biggest hit of her career on the soundtrack of a 1979 movie called *The Rose* based on the tumultuous life of Janis Joplin. You probably recognize these lyrics:

Some say love, it is a river that drowns the tender reed
Some say love, it is a razor that leaves your soul to bleed
Some say love, it is a hunger, an endless aching need
I say love, it is a flower, and you, its only seed

It’s the heart afraid of breaking, that never learns to dance
It’s the dream afraid of waking, that never takes the chance
It’s the one who won’t be taken, who cannot seem to give
And the soul afraid of dying, that never learns to live

When the night has been too lonely and the road has been too long
And you think that love is only for the lucky and the strong
Just remember in the winter, far beneath the bitter snows
Lies the seed that with the sun’s love in the spring becomes the rose

“Some say love...some say love...some say love...” and that “some” includes Jesus in today’s gospel passage, especially when it comes to the law—Jesus says love the Lord with all you are and all you have and love your neighbor as yourself. But what does that love look like?

As you may remember, the Greeks had four different words for love: *storge* (affection), *philia* (friendship), *eros* (romantic love), and *agape* (self-sacrificial love). Hopefully you have experienced all these kinds of love in one way or another—life giving affection from family, friends you can always count on to be there for you through thick and thin, the intoxicating thrill of being in love. But as wonderful as these kinds of love are, the love Jesus was talking about in today’s passage is the fourth of these: agape, self-sacrificial love.

Unlike the other kinds of love, agape love has absolutely no trace of self-interest, none. It is entirely focused on the other person. Agape love has no strings attached, no ulterior motives, no catch. In today’s passage Jesus identifies the two greatest commandments as agape-loving God and agape-loving others. “On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.” The entire Old Testament hangs on agape love.

In his book *The Four Loves* (1960) C. S. Lewis describes in detail each of the four Greek words for love. Listen to what he wrote about agape:

To love at all is to be vulnerable. Love anything, and your heart will certainly be wrung and possibly be broken. If you want to make sure of keeping it intact, you must give your heart to no one. Wrap it carefully round with hobbies and little luxuries; avoid all entanglements; lock it up safe in the casket of your selfishness. But in that casket—safe, dark, motionless, airless, it will change. It will not be broken; it will become unbreakable, impenetrable...The only place outside Heaven where you can be perfectly safe from all the dangers of love is Hell (121).

As sappy as it is, the reason Bette Midler’s song “The Rose” is such a landmark song is because it resonates with anyone who has, as Lewis put it, had their heart wrung and broken. That is why “some say love, it is a river that drowns the tender reed”; that is why “some say love, it is a razor that leaves your soul to bleed”; that is why “some say love, it is a hunger, an endless aching need.”

Because sometimes when you love someone with agape love, you have your heart wrung and broken—no sense sugarcoating it. And when that occurs it is easy to become cynical and “think that love is only for the lucky and the strong.” And when that happens it is not uncommon to decide, as Lewis wrote, “you must give your heart to no one....Wrap it carefully round with hobbies and little luxuries; avoid all entanglements.” And yet, that never works either, because Bette Midler is exactly right, indeed “it’s the heart afraid of breaking that never learns to dance” and “it’s the dream afraid of waking that never takes the chance...and the soul afraid of dying that never learns to live.”

At the Last Supper Jesus spoke to his disciples about agape love. But rather than simply reiterating what he said in today’s passage about the greatest commandments being to love with agape love God and your neighbor, Jesus made it clear that this is all in response to God’s agape love for us: “Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another...This is my commandment that you love one another as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends” (John 13:34 and 15:12-13).

And the next day Jesus did just that. On the cross Jesus died the most vulnerable death imaginable. On the cross Jesus’ heart was wrung and broken. On the cross Jesus’s sacred head was crowned with thorns that cut like razors leaving his body and soul to bleed. On the cross Jesus gave himself as the bread of life for those who “say love...is a hunger, an endless aching need.” On the cross Jesus proved that love is by no means “only for the lucky and the strong” as he died for all those whose luck and whose strength have run out. On the cross Jesus loved his Heavenly Father, loved the world, and loved you with everything he had and everything he was—and in doing so fulfilled “all the law and the prophets”, the entire Old Testament law in your place.

On the cross Jesus showed us once and for all what agape love looks like.

Today may the Holy Spirit minister God’s agape love anew to your heart and your life, and enable you to give back agape love to God, and give away agape love to others.

Amen.