

18th Sunday After Pentecost, September 14, 2008, Liturgical Year "A"

ST. BARTHOLOMEW'S CHURCH IN THE TOWN OF TONAWANDA, NY

The Rev. Fr. Arthur W. Ward, Jr. + Rector

Scripture: Romans 12:9-21

"The Anatomy of True Love" (part 2)

TRUE LOVE IS AGAPE LOVE

We continue our series, *"the Anatomy of True Love."* If there is one central core to the Christian faith it is love – love of God, love of fellow man and the truth that we can love because God first loved us and always loves us. Yet, we also saw that most people in our world misunderstand what is really true love, especially in Western Society. It's easy to look at love as just one of many emotions. But emotions or feelings come and go. Not so with love. Love is a command. Jesus commands us to love and you cannot command a feeling. So we saw how love involves choices and conduct. It is something we decide and something we do. Jesus said in **Jn. 14:15**, ***"If you love me, you will keep my commandments."*** **1 John 3:18** says, ***"Let us not love in word or in tongue, but in deed and in truth."*** Now love may contain or result in feelings as it often does, but we saw that it is not primarily a feeling.

I think what also adds to the confusion is that we only have one word for love in the English language. The Ancient Greeks, on the other hand, had several words for love. The Ancient Greek language was more exact than our present day English. And recall that it was Ancient Greek language which was the common language of the Roman Empire, and as a result our New Testament was written in Greek.

One of the words, the Greeks used for love was the word, *"eros,"* the word we get erotic from, and that referred to the physical love and attraction between a man and woman; the sexual aspect of love. God created this attraction. It is good. It is wonderful. But that's not the kind of love we are to have for everyone. That's to be reserved for one person, your spouse. So you better get the right one. Herbie was saying to Susie, "Susie, will you please go out with me?" Susie said, "No." And he said, "Why? Is there somebody else?" She said, "Herbie, there's got to be." One man, one woman to express sexual love.

Now there's another word that they used for love, and that was *"phileo"*, which means the love between friends. The word *philadelphia* (brotherly love) comes from this word. And that's fine, the love of friends and comrades. It is used at times in the New Testament to describe the love between our Christian brothers and sisters.

But the word for love that is used most often in the New Testament, the word used to describe the love between the Father and the Son, and the love God that has for us, and the word used most often to describe the love we should have for others is the Greek word, *agape*. *Agape* is unconditional love; love without any strings attached. It is the love that gives and gives of itself and keeps on giving. That's God's kind of love. God loves us unconditionally, period. No strings attached. God loves us not because of something we do, or if we do something or when we do something or after we do something, God just loves us because of who He is. That's why Christianity is so radical. That's what separates Christianity from all the other world religions. And it's God's grace and mercy that flow out of His love.

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The Beatles use to have a popular song back in the sixties, “All you need is love.” Well that’s wrong. It’s not “all you need is love,” because what kind of love are you talking about? What we all need, what the world needs is God’s love – *agape*.

But make no mistake, *agape* love is not a flowery, feel good, sweet, can’t we all get along kind of love that is taught and experienced in some churches. Someone has rightfully called such sappiness “sloppy *agape*.” Sloppy *agape*. That’s what you find in some churches. Slop, not the clean unadulterated truth of God’s love expressed in His Word.

Now, I don’t know if you realize it or not, but we found out a little bit of what *agape* looks like from Paul’s letter to the Romans 12. Let’s look at the passage again as we are going to continue where we left off and look at three more aspects of true love.

CONTRIBUTE TO THE NEEDS OF THE SAINTS

Now I want us to look at the phrase, “***Contribute to the needs of the saints.***” What does Paul have in mind here? Our money. He means giving of our financial resources to meet the needs of the saints. This is a reference to physical needs and spiritual needs. This means helping the poor with our resources. That’s why St. Bart’s has helped such ministries as the *Buffalo City Mission*, *Hearts for the Homeless*, why we had a Sunday devoted to *Compassion International*, encouraging our members to sponsor a needy child overseas. The Word of God over and over again, teaches us to remember the poor. When we look after those in need, God will especially watch over us. It is a spiritual principle.

But it is not only helping the poor, it is also meeting the spiritual needs of the church family. And God calls on us to give towards the spread of the gospel. We have had missionaries here before and it is why we have supported two of our own members who have gone on mission trips – Jennifer Brylinski who went to India for two weeks earlier this year, and Jeremy Merrick who is spending ten months in China.

And we contribute to the needs of the saints by giving to our church; the family we are part of. And this means tithing to the work of the Lord. That is how we show our love for the Lord and for our neighbor; with our pocketbook. Not just our kind words and outward actions but again with our money.

Just think for a moment again about the word, *agape* – it means to give of oneself, and to give of oneself sacrificially. And so we have to ask ourselves the question, do we sacrificially give of our financial resources? Do we tip God or do we tithe? Do you know what the average giving by church members is across America: 2-3%. And it is true here at St. Bart’s. But if all our members truly tithed we could turn our community upside down for the gospel. But if one is to tithe, faith is needed. And that my friends, is what we need to do - have faith to step out in love and give.

Paul then calls us to...

EXTEND HOSPITALITY TO STRANGERS

This exactly means what it says – welcoming people you don’t know. And you have to take the first step – a smile and an extended hand. That’s welcoming the stranger. And in

the church this means getting to know people you don't know. Can you imagine being in a family in which no one ever talks to one another? That wouldn't be considered a close knit family, would it? Some would even wonder if it was truly a family in the first place. So in our church family we are called to get to know one another. You don't have to like everyone but you do have to love them. And that means extending hospitality. That's one of the reasons we have a coffee hour after the 11 AM service.

Now there are some people who have the gift of hospitality. It comes natural. Such people are perfect candidates for a hospitality ministry of welcoming new comers to our church family. But even if we don't have the gift, we need to say hello and not be afraid to smile, and get to know our brothers and sisters in the Lord.

Next Paul gives us the hardest admonition of all....

BLESS THOSE WHO PERSECUTE YOU

This admonition begins a new paragraph with a recurring theme. How do you deal with those people who persecute or hurt you? Paul says we are to bless those who persecute us. What does He mean? We are to pray for their forgiveness and that they repent. This doesn't mean we pray that God blesses them. God won't bless someone who is in sin. But we pray for them that they see the error of their ways and then we work towards reconciliation. And what is necessary for reconciliation? – forgiveness in our hearts. We heard it in our Gospel lesson from Matthew. Jesus told the parable of the unmerciful servant. Forgiveness is necessary.

And that means if we are to bless and not curse, if we are to do good and not take revenge we need to give our hurt and our anger to the Lord and forgive the one who sinned against us before God. Then we can work to resolve the matter. And if they acknowledge their wrongdoing, then we have, as Jesus said in **Matthew 18:15**, won our brother. But if they don't acknowledge their sin then there is nothing more we can do. They are still accountable before God. And we must move on.

Now when Paul was writing these words he was writing to the real experience of Christians being persecuted by nonbelievers for their faith. In verse 17, the Greek we translate as, "**take thought of what is noble in the sight of all**" literally means "to think beforehand." In other words, we need to think before we act especially when people know we are Christians so that we do not fall into the trap of doing the same type of evil behavior that is being used against us.

And so instead of revenge, we are to show tangible signs of love. That way we will heap burning coals on the heads of our persecutors. What does Paul mean? It sounds like we are getting back at them. But not so. Paul was simply quoting **Proverbs 25:21-22** which probably referred to the ancient practice of putting hot coals on a dish and then on one's head to symbolize one's repentance. In fact, you can see the connection to putting ashes on our foreheads on Ash Wednesday. So the goal here is that the evildoers repent. That they see the error of their ways. That they be shamed and convicted of their wrongdoing. For it is only the power and warmth of God's love that can melt the coldest and hardest of hearts. And thus, it will be our good works of love that God will use to convict many of their sin.

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But now let me give you an example of this principle of helping one's enemies from our nation's history. After Germany's defeat in World War 1, the European Allies humiliated the German people, demanding that Germany pay war reparations. This clearly was an act of vengeance. One, that our president, President Wilson, could not support. As a result, the German people suffered terribly after having already suffered the horrors of war. This humiliation paved the way for the rise of Adolph Hitler and another World War. Fast forward now to the end of World War 2. The USA could have humiliated Japan and West Germany. But we didn't. We sought to rebuild both nations and worked to make them strong democracies. They thrived and became not just powerful nations once again, but peaceful nations. And later, West Germany was strong enough to absorb East Germany when it rejected communism in 1990. Our nation demonstrated the biblical principle of doing good to one's enemies. And it should be no different in our personal relationships.

Jesus showed us the way. He showed us that the way of true love is agape love. And agape love calls us to always work for the salvation and reconciliation of all people, including our enemies. And this means to not only pray for those who have hurt and wronged us, but to actively reach out to them at the opportune time, knowing that our very actions may save their very souls!

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, AMEN!