

David W. Lloyd: The Best Way of All

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The Best Way of All

Today's lectionary contains the prose poem about love in the 13th chapter of Paul's first letter to the Church in Corinth, considered his best and one of the world's great prose poems:

If I speak in human tongues or the tongues of angels, but have not love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. If I give away all I have, and if I deliver my body to be burned, but have not love, I gain nothing.

Love is patient and kind; love is not jealous or boastful; it is not arrogant or rude. Love does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice at wrong, but rejoices in the right. Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

Love never ends; as for prophecies, they will pass away; as for tongues, they will cease; as for knowledge, it will pass away. For our knowledge is imperfect and our prophecy is imperfect; but when the perfect comes, the imperfect will pass away. When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child; when I became an adult, I gave up childish ways. For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall understand fully, even as

I have been fully understood. So faith, hope, love abide, these three; but the greatest of these is love.

These 13 verses are commonly read at weddings, and some of you may have it included in yours. Sharon read this to me in our wedding ceremony. She told me the other day that she does not remember much of our ceremony but she does remember reading this. I am glad she did. I have needed it far more than I knew I would, and those of you who know me well can say "Amen" or otherwise express your sympathy to Sharon. Many times, I am downright unlovable, and those of you in my mission group or men's group can say "Amen."

And so it is with a great deal of humility that I want us to reflect on this passage, for I think it has a lot to say to us as Seekers Church, especially as we begin to develop ties with the Takoma and Takoma Park communities.

In the first place, we have to understand the context that Paul is writing. The letter is a response to a letter from the little church in Corinth, one of the three or four greatest cities of the Mediterranean world in Paul's time and recognized everywhere as the most immoral city in the Mediterranean world. As a seaport that had travelers and sojourners from everywhere, Corinth was rife with their gods and goddesses. People frequently spoke in tongues and otherwise exhibited signs of being in the throes of religious ecstasy. Devotees would consult seers and oracles. Some claimed to interpret omens. Some appeared to have the gift of healing. Despite the similarity of these behaviors and gifts, the devotees of these various mystery religions claimed that they were different since they belonged to different gods and goddesses. Above all, there was a fundamental disconnect between their religious practices and social morality. One observed the rituals of the appropriate gods and goddesses, one sacrificed animals and/or fruits and grains, one gave public thanks. Nevertheless, the gods and goddesses did not demand any particular kind of moral behavior. A devotee of Poseidon, one of the important deities in Corinth, could be an upstanding citizen or a degenerate; it did not matter to Poseidon. One's social class dictated one's behavior. So rich women had the same ethical behaviors regardless of

whether they paid worship to Cybele, the Great Mother, or to Hera, the wife of Zeus, or to Isis.

The Corinthian congregation that Paul loved, however, was different. It had members with a range of spiritual gifts – those who had experienced the risen Christ and were commissioned to be missionaries, prophets, teachers, miracle workers, healers, those who spoke in tongues, those who could interpret, and others. However, all these were the gifts of the one Spirit. Moreover, everyone's behavior, high or low, was held to the same ethical standard. From time to time discord broke out, with people claiming that they were, after all, Jewish and not Gentile, or free persons, and not slaves, or men, and not women. Sometimes the community would be full of grumbling that some people were more important than others were, or that their spiritual gift was more important than someone else's was.

Paul would have none of that. In that portion of the letter that was in last week's lectionary, he reminded them that they are part of the body of Christ, and just as no part of the human body is better than another, each of them is needed for the Body.

Then he points to the better way. It does not matter if you are an evangelist, or if you have the gift of speaking in tongues, if you do not have love, your speaking is useless. In fact, you are the noise that grates on people. It does not matter if you have the spiritual gift of prophecy, a gift that Paul especially values, if you don't have love, you're worth nothing. If you have the gift of faith, but do not have love, you are nothing. You may have knowledge of hidden truths – gnosis – but without love, your knowledge is useless. In Seekers Church we might say, if you have a gift for conducting the liturgy, but do not have love, the rite empty. Or if you have a gift for conducting silent retreats, but do not have love, the retreat was meaningless. Or if you can do a terrific children's sermon, but do not have love, we wasted five minutes. Alternatively, if you have the gift of hospitality towards strangers, but do not have love, your efforts were not welcoming.

What is this thing called love about which Paul is

talking? The New Testament uses three Greek words for “love:” philo, eros and agape.

Philo is closeness, affection, friendship, deep caring. It is the root of “Philadelphia” – the city of brotherly love. It is patient, kind and not envious. It is not boastful, conceited, or rude, not selfish or quick to take offense. The relationship that the disciples seem to have had with each other at their best was philo love.

Then there is Eros. Eros tends to have a bad name among Christians, since it is commonly thought to mean lust. It does, but eros also means more than mere sexual desire. It means a more generalized intense desire, ardency, passion, an association with the beautiful that stirs our soul. When I hear a piece of music that moves me to tears, or see a sunset that moves me to silence, or feel the rush of pleasure that comes from a final second win by my team, eros has been present. The dictionary defines it as “the aggregate of pleasure-directed life instincts whose energy is derived from libido.” Since Eros springs from the libido, it has the capacity to collapse our boundaries of ego. This is what happens when we fall in love. Moreover, we can generalize our passion from one person to several persons, and with luck, to all humankind. Eros can bear all things – at least for a while.

Then there is agape, also pronounced “AH-gah-pay.” It means God’s love, and as a noun, it is almost never found in Greek literature before the Christian era. Originally, it seems to have meant “sympathy” or perhaps “compassion.” As a noun, it does not appear at all in Mark, Acts, Titus, James, or in First and Second Peter. Most of the time, it appears it appears as a verb. All in all, whether we look at agape as either a noun or a verb, we find that of all the references to love in the new Testament, Jesus in the Synoptic gospels made 10 percent of them, Paul 28 percent, and John (in both the Gospel and the three letters) 33 percent – all the rest made only 16 percent.[1] The best description of agape is found in that same 13th chapter of the first letter to the Church in Corinth.

So let us reread the text:

If I speak in human tongues or the tongues of angels, but do not love with God's love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not love with God's love, I am nothing. If I give away all I have, and if I deliver my body to be burned, but do not love with God's love, I gain nothing.

God's love is patient and kind; God's love is not jealous or boastful; it is not arrogant or rude. God's love does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice at wrong, but rejoices in the right. God's love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

God's love never ends; as for prophecies, they will pass away; as for tongues, they will cease; as for knowledge, it will pass away. For our knowledge is imperfect and our prophecy is imperfect; but when the perfect comes, the imperfect will pass away. When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child; when I became an adult, I gave up childish ways. For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall understand fully, even as I have been fully understood. So faith, hope, God's love abide, these three; but the greatest of these is God's love.

Jesus did not talk in the abstract about agape love as a noun; he demonstrated agape love. He demonstrated it so well that we came to understand his constant giving of his total self, without reservation, without condemnation, without calling attention to itself or diminishing the other person is the way God loves us. I am always moved by the passage in John's Gospel after the resurrection, when the disciples who were fishermen have reverted to their previous life. They caught nothing all night, and Jesus appears on the shore, telling them to cast their nets on the other side. When the

net suddenly filled with fish, the disciple Jesus loved told Peter that it was Jesus. Peter, once afraid to walk on water, now quickly dove over the side and swam ashore. Jesus fed these disciples a breakfast of bread and fish.

Then he gently asked the one he had once renamed Peter, “Simon son of John, do you agape love me – do you love me with God’s kind of total loving – more than everything and everyone?”

Peter replied, “Yes, Lord, you know that I philea you – I love you like a brother.”

“Then feed my lambs.” And again, “Simon son of John, do you agape love me?”

“Yes, Lord, you know I philea you.”

“Then tend my sheep.” A third time he said, “Simon son of John, do you philea love me – Are you my friend?”

Peter was hurt that when he asked him a third time his words were, “Are you my friend?” “Lord, you know everything. You know that I philea you.”

“Feed my sheep.”

Simon Peter had three times denied following Jesus, once claiming that he did not even know the man. Moreover, whether or not he knew it at the time, he had told the truth. He had not really known Jesus at all. He had not been able to love Jesus or others with Jesus’ agape love. Now, Jesus had acted with agape love at the level that Peter could accept; Jesus had reclaimed him as a friend. In a few weeks, Peter became a leader of the little band of disciples and spoke with vigor on Pentecost, pouring out agape love on the religious pilgrims, bringing salvation.

Like Simon Peter, Christians have come to know God through Jesus’ acts of love, and to know that God is love, and that God’s love is always a verb, always action and not merely a feeling, an action that is always claiming and reclaiming us. Moreover, in gratitude – not out

of a sense of obligation – we try to express agape love towards God by expressing it to each other.

The basic premise of the Seekers Church is that out of gratitude for this agape love each of us commits to discern and carry out the call of God on our life to pass on this agape love to the world that desperately needs it. We live out the call of God on each of our lives, using the gifts that God has given each of us, sustained by the Holy Spirit through the agape love of the Seekers Church community. This premise is what we have to offer Takoma, Takoma Park, and the world.

When we look closer, we recognize that we never fully live out this premise. The world is a broken place, and so, in carrying out this commitment we make mistakes, fail to keep the commitment itself, unconsciously sabotage the success of our mission and grievously wound each other. We spend a lot of time agonizing over whether we have a call, or whether we failed to hear it, or whether we understood it correctly. In addition, we spend a lot of time agonizing over our gifts – not sure that we have the right one or right ones we need to live out our call. Praying, but not always without ceasing, that we may be given the right gift. Praying for courage to live out of our gift.

In fact, we may agonize over our call and our gift or gifts so much that we forget that the greatest thing is not our call, not our gifts, but agape love. Paul tells us that prophets will someday not be called to prophesy. Some day ecstatic utterance will end. Our gifts of knowledge and discernment will vanish. Only agape love will persist. The good news is that like Peter, we can return what love we have, and God always accepts it and reclaims us.

When I look for signs of love in Seekers Church, I see lots of them. I see Rachel Halterman humbly offering her gift of financial accounting to us, and I see us gratefully accepting her gift. I see Brenda Seat and Trish Nemore praying for the spiritual mentoring of our children and youth, and I see those youth making sandwiches for homeless people in our city. I read a series of e-mails concerned

about the health of Emily Gilbert's husband Carl. I see relationships nurtured with families through Hope and a Home. I see people coming to participate in the memorial service for Kevin Ogle's father, a man they never knew. I see and hear the passion in the creations of the Artists Mission Group, and the interest in the art displays of our children. I hear the understated caring in the voices of the men's group as we listen to each other's lives. I see the tears in the eyes of the cast and visitors following Roy Barber's musical on sexual minority youth. I see tears in all of us as we bid Sonya and Manning Dyer farewell.

I leave it up to you as to whether these are all agape love. Some of them may be philo, some even Eros. That is all right. Out of gratitude for the agape love we have received, each of us returns what love we can back to God through the Seekers Church community.

Two weeks ago in the School of Christian Living "[Through the Lens](#)" class, we saw a film clip from the movie *Romero*. Romero has been an academic, a nonpolitical safe choice to be appointed archbishop. However, when the land reform and other political activities of a Jesuit-led congregation in a village are perceived as a threat to the elite and powerful, the village comes under martial law and the army uses the church as a barracks. When Romero, who reveres the mass with academic detachment, enters to remove the elements for the Eucharist from the de-sanctified church, a soldier sprays the sacristy with machine gun fire. A flabbergasted, horrified Romero leaves the church, only to encounter the stoic expectant faces of the peasant congregation and the Jesuit priests. He gets in his car, then gets out and swiftly re-enters the church, crawling on hands and knees to gather the wafers for the Eucharist. The soldier sprays machine gun fire into the altar itself, directly over the crouched Romero, then shoves him outside. The peasants watch in silence as Romero drives away. They wait in silence, and his car comes back. This time he dons his stole to celebrate the Mass. The peasants silently come to his side and together they enter the church, shaming the soldiers, and reclaiming the church for worship. It is clear that Romero felt the agape love of the congregation and responded with courage that

energized their own courage. Reclaiming the church was an act of love.

I stand before you admitting that I cannot love with agape love. I certainly cannot love with agape love by myself. Nevertheless, I can commit to trying to learn to love with agape love through you and with you. And I do make that commitment. I invite you to make a similar commitment back to me and to each other. Take the time in mission group or other small group this week to make it. Moreover, maybe the commitment to try to learn to love with agape love will unleash it in us for Seekers Church, for Takoma and Takoma Park, and for the world.

[1] Interpreter's Bible Dictionary, "Love in the NT"