

“The Fruit of the Spirit: Love”

(Galatians 5.22-23a)

John 15:9-17; 1 Corinthians 13:1-13; 1 John 4:7-21

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The Fruit of the Spirit is ... *love*. But what *kind* of love? Merriam-Webster has nine different definitions for the word “love,” as a noun. The American Heritage dictionary has ten; dictionary.com has fourteen! Those definitions range from “a profoundly tender, passionate affection for another person” to “a feeling of warm personal attachment or deep affection, as for a parent, child, or friend” to “sexual passion or desire” to “strong predilection, enthusiasm, or liking for anything” to the tennis term for a score of zero. Paul probably wasn’t thinking about that last one! But what *was* he thinking about? Love between close friends? Erotic love? A passionate liking for something, as in, “*I love Spartan football!*”

The ancient Greek language was quite a bit more precise than our English. They distinguished between four different kinds of love, and they used different words for each. There was *storge*, which is the natural fondness that typically exists between people who grow up in the same family, like the love between a brother and a sister. There is *philia*, the love that exists between close friends who share common values and interests, as in our word “Philadelphia,” the “city of brotherly love.” There is *eros*, that sense of “being in love” with a particular individual. That’s where we get our word “erotic”. Then, finally, there is *agape*, which refers to a special kind of affection between two people, and especially refers to the affection that exists between God and humanity. It is this word *agape* that appears with great frequency in the New Testament, and in Paul’s list of the nine Fruits of the Spirit. When Jesus reminds us to “love God with all our heart” and “love our neighbor as ourself,” he’s using the verbal form of that same word, *apage*. The first fruit is not *storge* (family love), or *philia* (friend love), or *eros* (romantic love); it is *agape*. This word *agape* only appears in the pages of the Bible and in the writings of later Christians. There had been a similar word, *agapesis*, in classical Greek; Aristotle used that word, and it simply meant “affection.” But the biblical writers seem to have *created* this new word, *agape*. Apparently there just wasn’t a word in classical Greek for “Christian love.” If you want to know what *agape* means, you have to go to the Bible. There is, quite literally, *no other place to go*.

So when we look to the Bible, what do we find? The word occurs 116 different times, in 106 different verses. There are three particular passages where the word *agape* comes prominently to the fore, where the meaning of that word really *shines*: one passage in the gospel of John, one in the first letter of John, and one in that very familiar passage in 1 Corinthians, which is often used at weddings.

Let's start with that passage in John 15. Jesus is talking to his disciples at the Last Supper. "As the Father loved me, I too have loved you." Notice the direction of love. It comes, first and foremost, *from God*. It comes from God *to Jesus*, and then *from Jesus to us*. We experience agape love *only* because God offered it to us through Jesus. "Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so" – that's agape love. It is a special gift from God, a pool of beautiful, shimmering water, like a fountain or a waterfall pouring down into a basin. Agape love exists in that basin. It does not exist anywhere else. It does not exist without God; it does not exist without Jesus; it does not exist outside the church.

I went through a phase in my young adult life where I was in a bit of rebellion against my Christian upbringing. I had left the church and God was trying to bring me back in. One Sunday I decided to try out a Unitarian Universalist church. They had a ceremony in worship that morning which, I think, was supposed to feel like communion. Everybody would come forward to the front, like we sometimes do communion by intinction, except instead of receiving the bread and the cup you would receive a pretty little flower. The people were friendly; I had a nice conversation with some folks after the service; but let me tell you – *that was not communion*. It was not agape. There was no flowing of the love from God through Jesus to us. It was an imitation of the basin, but it wasn't the basin. Agape love only exists in that community of people who receive the love of God through Christ Jesus our Lord.

Which means, if we want to know what agape love is all about, we have to know what *Jesus* is all about. We have to know about the incarnation, the Word becoming flesh. We have to know about the redemption that we received on the cross. We have to know about the gift of new life that is offered to us at the empty tomb. We have to know about the sanctification that comes to us through the ongoing work of the Holy Spirit. And when I say "know about," I don't just mean *head* knowledge. I mean *experience*. I mean *feeling in your heart what Jesus has done for you*. Agape love is the divine love that is poured out for each one of us through Jesus, and which we who receive Christ's love share with one another. It is rooted and grounded entirely in Jesus. It is experienced only in the community of faith, in that fellowship of believers around the world who have experienced the love of Christ.

So when we turn to that famous "love" passage in 1 Corinthians 13, we have to keep this *Jesus love* in full view. "If I speak in tongues of human beings and of angels but I don't have love, I'm a clanging gong or a clashing cymbal." He's not talking about *storge*, or *philia*, or *eros*; he's talking about *agape*. He's talking about the love that exists – or ought to exist – within a community of Christian faith. He's really not talking about marriage *at all*, nor is he talking about love for our non-Christian friends, neighbors, or co-workers. He's talking about how we *Christians* ought to be treating one another: with patience, with kindness, without jealousy, without bragging, without arrogance, without rudeness, without seeking one's own advantage, without being irritable, without keeping a record of complaints, without injustice, *with the truth*. He's talking about *Christian community at its absolute best*.

Now, it's important to remember: the Jesus who gave his life for the sins of the world is the same Jesus who held people accountable when their ways deviated from the ways of God; the Jesus who showed grace to the woman caught in adultery is the same Jesus who went toe-to-toe with the Pharisees and Sadducees; the Jesus who healed diseases and cast out demons and forgave sinners is the same Jesus who turned over the tables of the moneychangers in the temple. Jesus' whole ministry was

a ministry of love, but a ministry of love sometimes involves saying a firm “no” to people who are teaching false doctrines or practicing injustice or being flagrantly disobedient to the will of God. Jesus had absolutely no hesitation calling people out for bad behavior. Neither did the other New Testament writers. There were Christians who were sleeping around in Corinth – and Paul called them out. There were Christians who were distorting Christ’s teachings – and the early church leaders called them out. Christian love does not mean *letting things happen that shouldn’t be happening*. Is there a priest or a pastor or a Sunday School teacher who’s abusing kids? *That has to be stopped*. Is someone mishandling the church finances? *That has to be stopped*. There are some times when you have to put appropriate boundaries around people if they are hurting other people, or the community, or themselves. Sometimes, people who persist in doing wrong need to be disciplined. Agape love does not tolerate injustice, or falsehood, or any other kind of sin. Agape love is the kind of love that Jesus consistently demonstrated: on the one hand, tremendous grace for the hurting, for the lost, for the sinners who truly repent; on the other, tremendous rebuke for those who teach falsely about God and for those who persist in their sin. Some churches err too much on the side of *judgment*, slinging harsh words every which way without ever doing any self-examination. Other churches err too much on the side of *grace*, never holding anyone accountable for the things they do that are just simply *wrong* in the eyes of the Lord. Real agape embodies mercy *and* accountability hand-in-hand.

In the first letter of John, we are instructed to “love each other, because love is from God.” He reminds us that the basis for our love for one another is the love that comes from God. “This is love: it is not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son as the sacrifice that deals with our sins.” We receive this love from God, then we share it with our fellow believers. “God is love, and those who remain in love remain in God and God remains in them.” That’s the challenge – to *remain in God’s love*. The love needs to keep flowing *into* us, and then flowing *out* from us. “We love because God first loves us.” In order to love others, *we have to keep receiving God’s love*. We have to keep hearing God’s Word, keep receiving God’s grace, keep renewing ourselves at Christ’s table, keep turning from our sin. *We can’t share Christ’s love with others if we’re not receiving it ourselves*. What does this look like, in actual practice? What does it mean, in a community of faith? It means, for one thing, taking care of the sick, the homebound, those who are hurting; reaching out with love and care in a whole variety of ways – and, honestly, I think we do a pretty good job of that around here, with all the ministry that you do. It also means that we don’t always have to agree with each other about every last little detail of church life, or politics, or social issues. It even means we don’t even have to *like* each other all the time. Maybe there’s someone a few pews over from where you’re sitting who just drives you nuts. The Bible doesn’t say you have to *like* that person. It says you have to *love* them. You have to be willing to treat that person with respect. You have to be able to recognize that God loves that person just as much as God loves you, that Christ died for that person just as much as you. And, if necessary, you have to be willing to lay down your life for that person ... just as Jesus laid down his life for you.

Agape love is undoubtedly the hardest kind of love. It requires a love for all sorts of different kinds of people. It requires that we *live the Jesus way*, which is something that none of us have mastered. And it requires that we keep Christ at the very center of our lives ... all the time.

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