

**Sermon for the Sixth Sunday of Easter  
Year C**

**[RCL] Acts 16:9-15; Revelation 21:10, 22-22:5; John 14:23-29 or John 5:1-9; Psalm 67**

There is something perplexing and difficult at the heart of the Christian faith. This perplexing something is the central value of the Kingdom of God; the primary, identifying characteristic of the Christian Church at its best and the clearest picture we have of our relationship with Jesus and his relationship with us.

At the same time, this perplexing and difficult something at the heart of our faith is both the best description we have been given of who God is and the clearest command our Lord gives to us. It's a quality or a type of relationship, and it's proclaimed as the greatest, strongest, and most persistent gift we are given.

It's what the Gospel today talks about. The English word is "love" and that's really a shame. The early church was smarter than we are. The early church knew that this difficult and perplexing quality of relationship was a new thing, its own thing, revealed by Jesus and in Jesus. So, when the early church talked about this new thing, it pretty much invented a new word. The church took a seldom used, vague and antiquated Greek term and used it to describe what it was talking about. The Greek word, we all know, is Agape.

The advantage of doing this was that every time the Church used this word, people would know exactly what was being talked about—they would know that what was meant was the command of Christ, the life of God, the goal of the Christian and the greatest power in creation. It meant that, and nothing else. There was really no other meaning for Agape. This was real handy; it avoided confusion. Also, by doing this, nobody thought they knew what the word meant until they learned it from the Lord and through the Church.

We haven't been that smart. We took that precise and specific Greek word "Agape", and we ended up translating it as one of the most vague, most misused and abused words in the English language. We call it "love", a word with a jillion meanings. So, most of the time when we hear the word "love" used in the Bible we think we know what it means. But we almost certainly don't. Instead, we're probably confusing agape with one of those jillion other things that the word "love" means in English.

So we hear Jesus saying, "If you loved me, you would rejoice that I am going to the Father" and we actually think we understand what Jesus is talking about. After all, we love our new car; and we love chocolate; and we love our spouses and our kids; we love to go fishing; Romeo loved Juliet; and – judging from bumper stickers – we love every conceivable breed of dog and cat – and many cities. Or at least we "heart" them, which I guess means love. And none of that has any real connection to what John is talking about when he says that God is Love, or with what Jesus is commanding us to do when he commands us to love him or one another. When we love in any of those other ways we are not keeping the Lord's commandment, we are not imitating the nature of God.

The word is a problem. The King James Version of the Bible generally used “charity” instead, which has some advantages – at least it’s not erotic and it’s clearly voluntary. No one comes home from a long weekend and says, “I’m so happy, I just fell in charity with Elbert.” But, for better or worse, “charity” got taken over by other non-profits and really doesn’t work these days. We’re stuck with “love,” but I wish we weren’t.

All of this is to say that when we hear the word “love” used by and about Jesus Christ, God, and the Christian community, we cannot automatically assume we know what it means. Certainly, when we talk to non-Christians about love, we can safely assume that they do not know what it means. Ordinary English usage seldom gives us even a hint of what the Bible is talking about. Yet this peculiar difficult and perplexing thing is both the purpose of our lives and the way to that purpose.

Listen: There is only one way to learn what the Christian faith is talking about when it talks about love. There is only one way to discover which of all the different experiences we have are really experiences of love in this sense. There is only one way to know what we are commanded to do when we are commanded by our Lord to love God and one another. Only one. We can learn of love – Christian love, agape – only from Jesus Christ. Period. It’s only from knowing him: from knowing what he said and what he did, who he was and who he is, that we can know what love is. Until we realize this we will always miss the point. The call to love is a call to Jesus: to know him, to live his life, and to walk his path. The Bible, theologians, living examples, saints and other greats of the faith, these can help, but only if we know Jesus first. You see, the truth of the matter is that there is no single, precise, definition of Christian love, of agape. There is, instead, a person, Jesus of Nazareth, who lives it and who shows us what it is and who gives it to us that we may show and give that same love to the world.

Last week we heard Jesus say, “I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another.” So says the Lord to the Church. What does this love mean, what does it look like? To discover this, we have to look to Jesus. And when we do that, the first thing we see is that it has nothing to do with how we feel inside; it’s about how we choose to act; it’s about what we do. So, we know that, in part, love looks like turning one cheek when the other has been hurt; it looks like going two miles when one mile is unfairly asked; it looks like offering prayers in response to insults.

We know that it looks like a father welcoming home a son who was lost; like paying a full day’s wage to a worker who showed up an hour before quitting time—and it looks like rejoicing in each of these. It looks like losing your life in the hope of finding it; and it looks like obedience to a God who will tell us neither the specifics of our task nor the consequences of our faithfulness. It looks like all of that, and much, much more. But really, finally, and at its clearest, it looks like this. It looks like a cross—it looks like the cross. This is what we Christians really mean when we talk about love. And if we ever mean anything else, then we most certainly mean something less—and we are unfaithful to our Lord, and we mock his commandment. This cross (without the pretty symbols) is what it means for God to love us; this is what it means for us to love one another. You won’t find this on bumper stickers, in cheap novels, or in plain brown envelopes. But it can be found.

That's really the central thing I have to say about love. We must constantly be reminded of this, lest we confuse our Lord with either Pollyanna or Hugh Hefner, and thus reduce our faith to another cheap route to self-delusion or to empty self-gratification.

So, to find out what John means when he says that God is love, or to discover what it looks like to love one another as Jesus has loved us, we do not look deep within our selves, we do not look around us, or at our families, or at our society or at the natural world. Instead, we look to the Lord, and to his life—to all of his life. There we will find, in all its depth and simplicity, what we Christians really mean when we talk about love. And there we will find life.

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