

That Still More Excellent – and Difficult - Way
1 Corinthians 13

4th Sunday in Ordinary Time/ 30th January 2021

Paul had a church in conflict on his hands. First Church, Corinth was plagued with divisions and suffering from an assortment of moral and dogmatic sins. The place was a mess. A group in the church believed they were especially blessed with gifts of the Spirit. And so they fought over spiritual gifts—of all things!—what were they, who had them, how to get them, and which gifts counted more than others. Looking back, it was very childish, but it almost tore the church apart. As a skilled pastor, he turned to love to help the church begin to heal.

In his letter to them, after an extended section regarding spiritual gifts, Paul takes a breather, pauses, and then launches into one of the most beautiful and well-known poems in the Bible, a hymn to love that continues to be sung across the ages, even by people who aren't Christian. Paul says to the Christians in Corinth, all you need is love because love is all you need. Love is the solution. But if it were that simple, the church would have been a far more accepting, understanding, and loving place throughout its long history. As with most things about the gospel, it's complicated, complex.

So let's try to listen to this well-known, overused text with fresh ears. Often, these days, we associate this text primarily with weddings, both within and without the church. One of my good friends, Tom Sheffield, a Presbyterian minister who served in New Jersey, told me of the time when after a wedding, which included a reading from 1 Corinthians 13, he was greeting guests as they were going out the door and made a point of saying, referring back to the reading, "That was really beautiful. Did you write it yourself?" In many respects, this text is a marvelous reading for a wedding. It can inform what a marriage should and can be like. But Paul wasn't thinking about marriage when he wrote these words, and it certainly has nothing to do with romantic love. Right after Paul gives us this poem, he talks about spiritual gifts. So, we have to be careful not to decontextualize the text and make it into something it's not.

So what is Paul saying to his church? We need to turn to the Greek, which has four different words for our one English word, love. There was *philos*, the love of friends; there was *eros*, meaning sexual love or, better, desire; there was *storge*, the love of parents for a child; and *agape*, a rarely used word adopted by the early church to describe the Christian life. *Agape* is selfless, other-oriented, or sacrificial love, unconditional love. To stress the importance of *agape* doesn't reject *eros* or *philos* or *storge* for the Christian. All four matter. Every time love is mentioned to this church in conflict, the Greek reads *agape*. So what does it mean to love *agapeically*? (And, yes, this is a word.)

While *eros* and *philos* and *storge* are important, *agape* gives life and form to the church. Because Jesus was the fullest embodiment of *agape*, *agape* animates the body of Christ, the church. *Agape* is the heartbeat of a congregation; it's what sets the pulse and rhythm of this living, breathing body we call the church and moves it forward.

What is *agape*? There's a feeling element to it, but it's not the same as *eros* or romantic love or the feelings associated with a parent's love for a child. In some ways, though, feelings have little to do with it. This kind of love is a choice, a conscious decision, an act, not always based on how one feels on a given day. A decision to do what? Yes, it's selfless love, choosing to put others first over your own needs and wishes. Yes, it's sacrificial love, making sacrifices for the sake of the other. Yes, it's unconditional love. There are plenty of people who are good at putting the needs of others first, who make all kinds of sacrifices for others (sometimes for the wrong reasons). These people might be celebrated for the sacrifices and even selflessness they embody, but it's not necessarily love. There is a dimension of love here. But is there anything distinctively Christian about it?

We must go a little deeper and remember something that has been neglected when we talk about Christian love. If *agape* is the kind of love Jesus embodied in his life and called people to follow, what Paul called "a still more excellent way" (1 Cor. 12:31b), then we must say Christian love includes *choosing to suffer for the sake of the other*. Not in a masochistic way. Not self-flagellation (which has a long history in the church). Jesus demonstrated with his life: "there can be no love without suffering." Contemporary theologian Paul Fiddes gets to the heart of this connection between love and suffering. "[For] suffering in the widest sense means the capacity to be acted upon, to be changed, moved, transformed by the action of, or the reality of another."¹

To suffer means to undergo, to bear, to permit, to allow. It means to be moved, to be acted upon by the experiences of the other. To love this way involves a shared experience, and whenever we risk sharing in another's experience, we also risk being moved and having our lives changed. We bear the impact. This suffering bears all things experienced by another, believes all things believed by another, hopes all things hoped by another, endures all things endured by another. We suffer with those who suffer and rejoice with those who rejoice (1 Corinthians 12:26). And when we choose to put ourselves in the lives of others, when we risk empathy, that is, putting ourselves in the lives of those around us, when we wonder what it must feel like for them, to share in their pain and joy, when we risk that kind of imaginative wondering of what it's like to be another, something happens in us—their experience acts upon us, it touches us. In a moment or slowly over a lifetime, we are changed, moved, and maybe even transformed by what we share and experience together.

This is a different kind of love. Whenever we risk getting close to another human being, undergo another's experience, care for their needs, and share hopes and sorrows, we are acted upon, touched, and there's always the possibility that we will be changed. And because we often resist (and refuse) change, a part of us doesn't want to be acted upon, which means we withhold *agape*. We refuse to love because we don't want to be changed. And sometimes that fear is so great that we don't get close to another human being, and we build and maintain walls that keep us far apart.

But once you start wondering what it's like for another human being—particularly if that person or what he or she represents scares you or raises all kinds of fears and anxieties in you, or maybe it's someone you really despise or maybe that person is homeless and smells and makes you uncomfortable, or it's someone going through a rough patch, a couple on the verge of

divorce, someone lost, depressed, confused, sick, dying—it's possible that speculation will change you. For once we allow ourselves to be acted upon, that is, literally or imaginatively participating in the experience of another, then inevitably, our actions change. If we stay with this posture long enough, we just might find ourselves becoming more accepting or forgiving, more graceful. We just might find ourselves becoming more patient (1 Cor. 13:4), maybe even kind (1 Cor. 13:4). We might find ourselves holding back our agendas or opinions and not insisting on our own way (1 Cor. 13:5). Maybe we'll stop being irritable or irritating to others and give up being resentful and jealous and maybe even fearful (1 Cor. 13:5). Perhaps we'll stop competing with one another. "Comparison," Søren Kierkegaard (1813-1855) said, "is the most dangerous acquaintance love can make; it is the worst of all seductions."² We could say comparison kills. Perhaps you'll stop worrying about who has what spiritual gift and focus on the other, and serve the other, the fellow member of the body of Christ.

Can you see, then, how *agape* becomes the lifeblood of the body of Christ? *Agape* is the connective tissue that holds the community together and sustains its growth. It's the "excellent way," but also the difficult way. This work isn't easy. That's why we can't love in this way without the help of the Holy Spirit. It's not a call to love in general, but love in particular. Not love as an abstract concept or ideal we aspire to, but something concrete, tangible, embodied. And, significantly, Paul is talking about how individual church members relate to other members, he's talking to the entire community, the *ekklesia*, meaning a people called out to live in this still more excellent way. The church should and can be a community that's defined by this radical, difficult, life-changing way of loving, a community that believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things, together, for the sake of this love, for the sake of its Lord whom we have come to know as love. It is a community where its members choose to enter each other's suffering and joy.

Dorothy Day (1897-1980) knew a lot about the challenges of community. Roman Catholic social justice advocate, she wrote, "Love and ever more love is the only solution to every problem that comes up. If we love each other enough, we will bear with each other's faults and burdens. If we love enough, we are going to light a fire in the hearts of others. And it is love that will burn out the sins and hatreds that sadden us. It is love that will make us want to do great things for each other. No sacrifice and no suffering will then seem too much."³ This is the way of Jesus Christ. This is the way of Christ's *ekklesia*. Of every *ekklesia*, including Catonsville Presbyterian Ekklesia.

It's good to be reminded of this on this and every Lord's Day when Christ's *ekklesia* gathers for worship and today as we gather for the Annual Meeting of this *ekklesia*. I look back and remember and see and know the ways Christ's *agape* is at work in the choices of this congregation, in our capacity to suffer with and for one another and the world this past year, particularly as we weather the storm of this pandemic. I am grateful for the love that abides in and through this congregation. Are we perfect? Absolutely not. We have plenty of shortcomings. There's no such thing as a perfect church because it's full of imperfect people, sinful people, with plenty of blind spots and insecurities, anxieties, and fears. We're not called to be perfect but to be faithful. Called to follow our Lord in the way of *agape*—the *agapeic* way—this excellent and difficult way that brings life to the world, life to our souls, life to the church—the church which has no other reason to exist but to serve its Lord by sharing God's good news and loving

neighbor, loving God, loving self, loving enemy, stranger, the world. It's work that can only be done in and through the *ekklesia*, in the community. And as you know—I hope you know—it's a privilege and joy to do this work, the Lord's work, *together*.

¹ Paul Fiddes, *Participating in God: A Pastoral Doctrine of the Trinity* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2000), 171.

² Søren Kierkegaard, *Works of Love* (1847).

³ Robert Ellsberg, ed. *Dorothy Day: Selected Writings* (Orbis Books, 2005).