

Sermon for January 31, 2016 (Epiphany 4, Year C)
Offered by Nathan Ferrell at The Episcopal Church of Saint Mary

Texts: 1 Corinthians 12:31-13:13; Psalm 71:1-6; Luke 4:21-30

Know what: Annual Meeting & Vision Event Sunday – one parish liturgy

Title: The Agape Love of God

“Love is patient. Love is kind. Love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. Love does not insist on its own way. Love is not irritable or resentful. Love does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never ends” (1 Corin. 13:4-8a).

My friends: is it hard to live like this?

Is it difficult to practice this kind of love in your life?

If you are ready to raise your hand and SHOUT the “AMEN!”, then may I suggest that you might just perhaps be going about this whole LOVE thing in the wrong way?

This most famous chapter 13 of 1 Corinthians, the oh-so-familiar “Love Chapter”, is read at nearly every wedding in which I have participated.

And it is so ironic, isn’t it, because these words have nothing at all to do with romance. They say nothing about the love between two people who make lifelong vows and commitments to each other.

This famous chapter has nothing to do with marriage.

After all, what is it that Paul actually writes?

He does not say that *CINDY* is patient and kind.

He does not say that *HUGH* is not irritable or resentful.

He does not say that *JIM* bears all things and endures all things.

Those things may be true of each of you – and I’m sure they are – but that’s not the point of this text.

What is it that Paul says?

“Love is patient. Love is kind. Love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude... Love never ends.”

And who, exactly, IS this Love? Can you think of it?

“GOD IS LOVE, and those who abide in love, abide in God, and God abides in them” (1 John 4:16).

That verse comes from the First Letter of John, but it is not very far from what Paul is seeking to communicate here.

Now we need to remember that Paul is not a theologian nor a philosopher. He cares little for abstract ideas about God, about the Messiah. No, Paul is a shepherd. He cares about the real-life, practical challenges which face communities of disciples sharing life together.

The entire previous chapter (Chapter 12) was about spiritual gifts, about how the Holy Spirit equips the local Body of Christ with inter-dependent parts.

And the chapter AFTER this famous Love Chapter (Chapter 14) continues the discussion of Holy Spirit-inspired gifts within the community and how they are intended by God to build up one another.

Paul’s point is crystal clear. Within the Body of Christ, within the local community of disciples called to share life together, LOVE is the Holy Spirit-inspired gift needed most. Love is THE spiritual gift par excellence.

We can actually be even more specific. Remember that in the Greek of the New Testament there are 4 different words for our English word love. Eros. Philia. Storge. Agape.

We don’t have time now to go into the distinctions between these four, but they are significant – and important.

The word which Paul uses here is agape – and it means a commitment to the well-being of the other, regardless of who they are or what they do.

Agape exists because the lover CHOOSES to love.

And the Bible calls God by this word – agape – because God is the Lover who chooses to relate toward you, toward me, toward humanity in precisely the way that Paul describes.

Agape love is a choice. It is the choice of God.

But, again, we must not think that there is anything abstract about this agape love of God. This is a real temptation.

There is a tendency for some to think of the Gospel as a message about Christ.

(Even our last hymn today shares this same perspective: “Publish glad tiding, tidings of peace, tidings of Jesus, redemption and release.”)

But here’s the other part of this famous Love chapter which most people completely misunderstand: this agape love is made visible in the Body of Christ.

The good news of what God has done is NOT ONLY a story of what God has done for the world in the Messiah. The good news is also a brand new humanity – a new humanity which is embodied, visible, tangible, enacted by real communities of real human beings.

The message about Christ, the story of God’s agape love, makes no sense when it is separated from the Body of Christ.

For this local Body of Christ gathered here under the name of Mary, the way for us to measure our health, our faithfulness to God, our “success” if you will – though I am not sure that word has any meaning at all when we are speaking of the things of God – but the way for us to know if we are on the right track or not, is if the agape love of God is clearly evident in the way we act.

This is the truth: our parish’s health, the future of Saint Mary’s – this does not rely upon the quality and smoothness of our worship. It will not rely upon the length or depth of the sermons from this pulpit. It does not even rely upon us reaching the goal of our Stewardship campaign (sorry Janet Bowne!).

Our health as a parish family, and the future of Saint Mary's, relies upon the extent to which we allow this agape love of God to have its way within us.

I think that we could paraphrase Saint Paul's famous words and put them into our context here and say,

If we sing the most beautiful music with perfect voices and hear the most amazing sermons week after week, but we do not have agape love, we are simply a noisy gong and clanging symbols.

And if we have 500 pledging units and overflowing endowment funds which allow us to move mountains and build world-class facilities, but we do not have agape love, we are nothing.

And if we give away hundreds of thousands of dollars each year to non-profits and we build 10 schools in Haiti of which we can boast, but we do not have agape love, then we gain nothing.

All of these things are good. We need them. And we ought to do them, if we can.

But all of them mean nothing without the agape love of God.

If any of you have been around me over the last few weeks, you have probably heard me mention something about feeling a bit overwhelmed.

I'm not exactly sure why, and there is no single clear reason, but this month has felt quite busy and hectic.

Erin has reminded me on numerous occasions that I typically look forward to January as a quiet month, but not this year!

The good news though, my friends, is that the Lord used even this experience of busyness and frustration to speak a word of fresh insight.

Because this also is true: if I check everything off of my To-Do List and if I have time to take on every good suggestion that comes my way, but I do not have God's love in my heart, then I gain nothing!

And that is why this agape love of God must be the defining mark of our life together. Because we will always disappoint one another.

As your spiritual leader, there have been – and there will be – times when you wish that I had made that visit or that phone call or responded to that email or led that study or preached on that topic or chosen that particular hymn.

Whatever it may be, I will let you down, because I am only human.

And I am only one man.

And, if I am honest, there have been – and there will be – times when I wish that you had come to that Bible study or that special Holy Week liturgy or had increased your pledge or stepped up to lead this ministry or offered to lead this class.

Whatever it may be, you will let me down, because you are only human.

Now, it's easy to become frustrated and irritated. This is the most natural human response.

But the SUPER-natural, agape love of God is patient and kind. It is not irritable or resentful. Love endures all things.

No matter how many good things we may accomplish together, if we become impatient with one another, if we become irritable and resentful, if we allow frustration and anger to poison this Body, then all the good that we might do together we be worth nothing.

We will transition soon to our Annual Meeting and our Vision Event, and we will ask the Holy Spirit to guide us, and we will consider together what this new year holds for us, and we will dream again about what God wants to do with us and through us.

All of this matters. What we do together is important.

But what matters most of all is who we are, who we are becoming.

So how do we make sure that this agape love of God is present within us?

Not by trying harder. Not by sheer effort or willpower.

But by removing any obstacle to the Holy Spirit's movement among us.

Agape love. May this free gift of God always be the defining mark of this community known as Saint Mary's. Amen.

