

There's a lot of repetition in this gospel. Did you notice? How many times, for example, did you hear the word "love"? Nine. How about "commandments"? Five. And "abide"? Only twice, but if we include last week's gospel, which ends at verse 8, just before today's text begins, the word "abide" occurs 10 times in 17 verses. Why count words? Because repetition is a clue as to what matters to an author; we can assume that the author of John considers these words important: love, commandments, abide.

In today's reading, Jesus says, "As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love. If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love. This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. I am giving you these commands so that you may love one another." This text is on the list of Scriptures suggested for Lutheran weddings, because it reminds us that God, who loves us, expects us to share God's love with one another. But this gospel text is not just for prospective spouses; it's for all of us. The love of which Jesus speaks is broader and deeper than romantic love. It's not heart-fluttery brand-new love, or newlywed sweet, sticky love, or passionate erotic love. It's not familial love, as in the love of a parent for a child—or of two siblings for one another. Nor is it the love of your fellow human beings. What sort of love is Jesus talking about?

In Greek, the language in which the New Testament is written, there are four words for love. *Eros*, *storge*, *philia*, and *agape*. *Eros*—e-r-o-s. *Storge*—s-t-o-r-g-e. *Philia*—p-h-i-l-i-a. *Agape*—a-g-a-p-e. Can you repeat them after me? *Eros*. *Storge*. *Philia*. *Agape*. *Eros* is romantic love, intimate love; it's the source of our English word "erotic." *Storge* is familial love, a love awakened at first sight of your brand-new baby, the nurturing love of a grandparent. *Philia* is sibling love, the love of friends for one another, as in "Philadelphia, the City of Brotherly Love." The love of which Jesus speaks in John 15 is none of those, not *eros*, not *storge*, not *philia*.

Every time Jesus says "love" in this chapter, John uses the same Greek word: *agape*. *Agape* is described as "the highest form of love; charity; or unconditional love;" the Christian version is "love originating from God for humanity" or "selfless love passionately committed to the well-being of others." *Agape* is the love that Jesus gave his disciples, and it's the love that God gives you.

What does *agape* look like? What does it feel like? Well, as I said, it's not heart-fluttery or erotic or brotherly or familial love. It doesn't require that you "like" the object of your *agape* love. Jesus doesn't say, "Like one another, as I like you." Jesus' command is not about your feelings; it's about your actions. He says, "*Agape* one another;" that is, love others unconditionally and charitably, even when it's hard work, even when it takes effort, even when it's messy or challenging, even when the person you are loving is selfish or thoughtless or just plain irritating.

*Agape* looks like Jesus, who empties himself of his God-ness and bends down to share our human lot. *Agape* looks like Jesus in John's Gospel, Jesus who meets Andrew and Philip and invites them to follow him, Jesus who receives Nicodemus who is afraid to be seen with Jesus in daylight and so comes to him at night and hears Jesus say, God "so loved the world that God gave his only Son," Jesus who meets the Samaritan woman at the well and gives her living water, Jesus who heals a man who can't walk, Jesus who feeds the hungry, Jesus who teaches at the temple, Jesus who restores sight to a blind man, Jesus who brings Lazarus back to life.

When Jesus said, “Love one another as I have loved you,” where was he? At supper with his disciples. When? On the night before he died. When they heard him say, “as I have loved you,” the scenes recorded in John must have flashed through the disciples’ minds—at least the scenes any given disciple had experienced. “Oh,” said one, “Jesus commands me to love as he loved Nicodemus, meeting him at night.” “Oh,” said another, “There was that time Jesus listened to a Samaritan woman even though he wasn’t supposed to talk to her.” Others may have remembered seeing Jesus’s *agape* in his healing or feeding or teaching. “Oh,” they said, “that’s how he wants us to love: with kindness and mercy and hospitality, with firmness and compassion and graciousness.” Each of the disciples had been with Jesus in different situations, but all of them had seen Jesus loving others in words and actions; each of them had witnessed Jesus’s *agape* firsthand. But every one of them, in that instant, of hearing Jesus’ words, “Love one another as I have loved you,” must have remembered one scene in particular: Jesus expressing his *agape* directly to them, just moments before.

What was it that the disciples remembered in that moment? What had Jesus done, moments before? When they heard Jesus say, “Love one another as I have loved you,” what had they just seen? How had he just loved them? Here’s the scene, from chapter 13. At the meal, Jesus took off his cloak and wrapped a towel around his waist and bent down to each disciple in turn, washing and then drying their feet. This was a graphic image. It was a shocking image, so shocking that Peter protested. It was shocking because, in Jesus’ culture, it was not the host of the feast, held in a position of honor, who washed a guest’s feet, but rather the servant who washed feet dusty and sweaty and stinky from walking on unpaved roads. Jesus’s action of *agape* shocked the disciples, because, even though he was their master, he acted as their servant. He humbled himself to serve them. And then he said, “Love one another as I have loved you. Do to one another as I have done to you.”

What does it mean to love one another as Jesus loves us, my friends? What does it mean to abide in love? To love even when it’s challenging or messy, even when it’s hard work, even when it takes every last shred of our energy? To love with *agape* is to humble ourselves and to “keep on keepin’ on” even when the going is tough. It also means to forgive. We humans can’t live with each other without hurting each other, without disappointing each other, without doing things that just plain make each other mad, sometimes. So, as we abide in love, we forgive “those who have trespassed against us.”

How can we forgive those who trespass against us? How can we love as Jesus loved? Where can we get this *agape*? Can you find it at Aldis or Adams—or on QVC or Etsy? Can you borrow it from the library? Can you find a recipe on Pinterest? Where do we get *agape*, God’s unconditional love?

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, martyred in Nazi Germany for a plot against Hitler, has an answer. “Jesus Christ,” he writes, “stands between the lover and [those in need of love].” That is, Jesus stands between God and you, and Jesus stands between you and those you love. In other words, the source of love for your neighbor is the love you have already received from God. Martin Luther, after whom our Lutheran church is named, wrote in 1521, “[A]s our heavenly Father has in Christ freely come to our aid, we also ought freely to help our neighbor.” For Luther, as for Bonhoeffer, the source of your love for your neighbor is the love you have already received from God. To paraphrase John’s Gospel, “As Jesus has loved you, so you love your neighbor.”

One caveat here. *Agape* love is often described as “self-giving, sacrificial love.” And it is that. Jesus, of course, laid down his life for his friends; you can’t get more “self-giving” or “sacrificial” than that. And he directed his disciples to do the same. But he didn’t mean that you should look for a cross on

which to be crucified or let others walk all over you. Laying down your life doesn't mean letting a child who is addicted to heroin rob you or a mentally ill parent ruin your life or an abusive spouse take advantage of you. Practicing *agape* doesn't mean being a doormat for someone sloughing off the refuse of their unhealthy life.

So what does it mean to "lay down our lives for our friends"? Maybe to think of another's needs alongside your own, or sometimes before your own, particularly if their need is greater. When a neighbor is ill, you skip a favorite TV show to go shopping for her. When your co-worker is going through a divorce, you offer to take his kids to a movie, even if it might not be a movie you'd choose. When a friend is mourning, you give up an afternoon of gardening or knitting to be with them. When a schoolmate is sick, you hang around after class to get their assignments and drop them off. When a colleague is recovering from surgery, you adjust your schedule to pick up their mail. When your grandchild is throwing up, you clean up the mess. How do you lay down your life for your friends?

Jesus laid down his life so that you and I might have life. He desires life and wholeness for God's people, and he pours out himself in *agape* for the sake of the world, going to any lengths necessary. He pours his love over you as well. Once you receive God's love, God expects you to join in God's work of *agape*, to pour yourself out, to go to any lengths necessary to bear God's love to others. When God calls you to love someone hard for you to love, or when you seem to have exhausted your reserve of love, maybe you can remember Bonhoeffer's insight: that Jesus stands between you and the one God calls you to love. What matters is not your like or your love of them, but Jesus's location between you, and his love for you both, his love poured out freely and willingly, more than enough, so that you might share it.

My pouring out of myself, your going to any length necessary to help a neighbor is, however, even at its very best, only a dim reflection of Jesus' love; our love for others is only a poor likeness of God's *agape*. You may lay down your life by giving up, momentarily, something you enjoy for the sake of a neighbor, a sibling, or a stranger, but Jesus' love extended all the way to the cross, to death, and even to hell. He poured out his life in self-giving, sacrificial love, in *agape*, for the sake of the world—and for you. And that *agape* is worth some repetition, in John's gospel—and in your life, not just twice or five times or nine times, but forever and always. AMEN