

The Fifth Sunday of Easter. May 19, 2019. St. Augustine's in-the-Woods Episcopal Church. Mary K. Sandford, Ph.D. Acts 11:1-18, Psalm 148, Revelation 21: 1-6, John 13:31-35.

I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples. (John 13:34)

My brothers and sisters, we are certainly dropped down into drama with the readings today from the Gospel of John. For me, there are few passages from the New Testament with quite the same emotional power as today's message from John's gospel.

As I reflected on our scripture for today, I was reminded of a conversation around the table last Sunday. A group of us were talking in coffee hour and somehow the conversation came around to different churches...honestly, the details are not completely clear in my mind, we may have even been close to talking *real* theology, when one among us said, "It all boils down to love."

I could feel us as we relaxed, collectively taking a refreshing breath together and smiled and quietly celebrated the inherent truth of that statement. It was a comfort to me to remember that what it all boils down to is something that Christians hold as one of our highest ideals. And this is divine love, love that emanates from God; love that humans can abide in; love that humans can manifest through our actions. God is love and love is God. This special divine love is what I want to focus on. The Greek noun for this love is *Agape*.

The specific passage read today puts us in the middle of a scene in the upper room at the Last Supper. A familiar scene to us, it never ceases to have an emotional impact on me. What's the rest of the context?

The beginning of John, Chapter 13, marks a new section in this Gospel called the "Farewell Discourses"; it also marks a new section of the book of John. The first twelve chapters of John are known as the "Book of Signs" because they focus on the wondrous things that Jesus does (turns water into wine, healing a man at a pool in Bethesda,

encountering a Samaritan women at a well, but beginning in Chapter 13, things are going in a radically different direction. This section of John is called the Book of Glory because it focuses on the last days of Jesus' life, his resurrection and appearances to them after his death.

From the first verses of Chapter 13, we know that Jesus knew he was going to die. We are told at the beginning of the chapter, "*...his hour had come... Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end.* (New Oxford Annotated Bible, John 13:1) " They are having the Last Supper, Jesus then gets up, wraps a towel around himself, and washes the feet of his disciples. Jesus takes upon the role of servant and as we read, Peter has a little trouble understanding what was happening, Jesus tells him, if I don't wash your feet you're not in "fellowship" or community with me. It is after this that Jesus tells his disciples that one of them will betray him. And with powerful symbolism he dips a piece of bread and hands it to Judas. He is handing Judas his life. His life is to be sacrificed. He announces to his disciples "*Now the Son of Man has been glorified. And God is glorified,*" for it reveals Gods love, agape.

As Jesus tells his disciples he will be going somewhere they cannot go, his tone becomes one of deepest empathy as if he feels the shattering of innocence that will occur when his disciples see him taken away and killed. He addresses them as "my little children" as he breaks this news to him. And then:

"I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples."

What do we know about this divine love, *agape*, this love that originates with the sacred? Greeks had different words for other kinds of love: romantic love is *eros*; the love of friends is *phileo*, the love of family is *storge*.

Why did Jesus pick that moment to give his disciples a new commandment centering on *agape*? I believe that (as we said earlier) *it all boils down to love*. Divine love. It is love that not only originates in God but it is the very essence of God. God is love. It is love that can solidify a community. Agape is a word of action, which means that it can

be thought of as a spiritual practice. And in loving one another as he loved them they will be abiding, living, in that love. Agape changed the world. And it continues to change the world.

I've noticed in my own life that agape often occurs in connection with a calling, a calling so compelling that one simply must respond. We see a need and we are called to involvement because of who we are and we answer that call. In the early 1980s I found myself seeing and hearing the suffering of gay men in crisis when the first wave of the AIDS epidemic swept through my city. I never thought twice about becoming involved. I simply had to do it. In the early 1960s, in my small hometown in Arkansas, my mother heard of four African American students who were integrating the state college and who were being harassed on campus. She never gave it a second thought: she called an interracial meeting at our family home to build a network of support around those students.

When we hear the divine calling we are being invited to make something much bigger than ourselves. It is a calling - a spiritual calling - emanating from the highest form of love, inviting us to manifest that love in the world in some specific ways. In answering that call, we may build or contribute to a community, one that will sustain us as we share that calling with others. It comes from God to us, it is shared by us and in praise we acknowledge and give thanks back to God.

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. recognized agape as "the love of God operating in the human heart."¹ I believe that it is heart and mind acting together. It is intellect, emotion and prayer. Dr. King used words like creative and spontaneous to describe acting in and through agape love. Agape formed at some of the most essential underpinnings of the nonviolent movements, most especially the Civil Rights movement in this country.

Turning to our reading from the Acts of the Apostles, we have something of a case study in divine insight or revelation. Peter encounters the anger of those who are confronting him of violating the Laws of the Torah by eating with Gentiles. He answered a divine call, and received divine insight, which came through a vision. The Spirit told him to go with them and not distinguish between "us and them."

This calling leads him to meet with the Gentiles and then convey what he learned to the disciples. Peter came to understand that God had given the Gentiles the same gift that he and the disciples had been given. Peter reflects, "Who was I to hinder God?" Instead of rancor the apostles began to give praise.

And praise rings out through the cosmos in Psalm 148 for today. All creation is singing. The sun, moon and stars, the waters, creatures of all kinds, humans of all kinds, are united in praise for the divine love of their Creator whose works are known only from the beginning of time but a Divine Being who raises up his people in strength. This is again a vision of unity – this time of the entire Cosmos - things that have a living force within them. The idea that all that all things in the Cosmos – rocks, rivers, trees, stars, planets – have a life force within them is what anthropologists like myself would call animism. In modern times we usually regard such things as rocks as inanimate. In this hymn of praise everything is full of the divine energy that is born out of divine love. As I read this Psalm I wondered, can such a vision of unity help to repair our relationships to the universe...with all of creation...with other species that have been pushed to extinction.

I give you a new commandment. Love one another as I have loved you

The passage from Revelation similarly describes a vision of unity and Divine Love. And, it's not some dystopian nightmare, as is so often the case in modern mythmaking about the collapse of civilization. It's a vision of a world without suffering and pain, without heartbreaks. It is a world that has been healed, where the thirsty are filled with life giving water. It's a world where agape prevails.

Behold! I am making all things new. (Revelation 21:5)

Love, healing, unity and diversity...these are words that I associate with St. Augustine's –in – the - Woods. So in my preparations for today, I naturally thought about when Eileen and I first joined St. Augustine's and the many who welcomed us with a loving embrace in 2014.

Your ministries were already in our sights: we knew about the pet ministries, the annual blessing of the animals. We knew you were a

greening congregation with a church in the forest. We'd heard of the Episcopal Peace Fellowship and read about the annual Martin Luther King, Jr.'s Commemoration held at St. Augustine's. We knew that you were an inclusive congregation. All of these things are born of agape, build community, and reflect responses to the divine call.

Five years later, we are glad we are here. We are here to stay. And we will join our sisters and brothers of St. Augustine's in loving one another as we have been loved, ready to respond to the call of God's divine love, agape.

¹ Martin Luther King, Jr., 1957, *The Christian Way of Life in Human Relations*, Address Delivered at the General Assembly of the National Council of Churches.