

I. Love Is... John 21:15-19

There is love and there is love. When we speak of the word "love" in English, it can mean a whole lot of different things, and the word is used so broadly that it becomes very vague. Greek is different: a long time ago, the Greeks established several different words for different varieties of love. There's "eros," which has to do with physical passion; there is "storge," that has to do with family love; neither of those show up in our Gospel lesson. But two others do: "philos" and "agapé."

Philos is the sort of love that you find between friends. It's more or less a 50-50 deal, where each one says, "I enjoy your company and you enjoy mine; so we'll hang out together and do things together and do nice things for each other." It's not a perfect love, but it's a decent basis for most relationships. Then there's agapé. Agapé is perfect love. It's selfless and sacrificial. Where philos says, "I'll serve you as long as you serve me," agapé says, "I'll serve you even when you're not serving me. I'll continue to sacrifice for you even if you hurt me. I'll even sacrifice for you when you nail Me to a cross because of My love for you."

See, agapé is the term used to describe God's love for us. When John 3:16 says, "For God so loved the world that He gave His only-begotten Son," the "love" is agapé. When Jesus says in John 15:13, "Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends," the "love" is agapé. It's perfect love, selfless and sacrificial: "I'll love you even if you don't love me."

Because it's perfect, it's something that we sinners can't achieve, even though we should aspire to do so. The closest you come to agapé love among humans is in the love that parents have for children. When children are born, they're helpless little blobs with arms and legs that can't do a thing for themselves; and it's left to the parents to care for them. There's not much return on that for a long time, and children often won't appreciate how much service and sacrifice parenting takes until they have helpless little blobs of their own. Even so, the love of parents isn't pure agapé love: we'd rather diaper a smiling baby than one that's screaming to break our eardrums. We'd rather care for an obedient child than one who has just used a Sharpie to draw on the TV screen.

There's one other human relationship where agapé definitely comes into play, one that gets mention in Scripture: it's marriage. In Ephesians 5:25, husbands are told to love their wives as Christ loved the Church, and gave Himself up for her. Husbands are to selflessly sacrifice for their brides, just as wives are supposed to selflessly serve their husbands. That is the only way a marriage will work, when husbands and wives are intentionally doing the hard work of forsaking self and serving the other continually. They can't do perfectly: they can't sustain unconditional love, even though it's required. That's why love between husband and wife needs to include confessing to one another and forgiving one another .

We're almost at our Gospel lesson (trust me!), but we need to point out one more thing about love. There's a false love that tricks people into thinking it's agapé. It's infatuation, also known as a "crush." This isn't love at all: it's desire, and desire can be as bad as good. Remember, agapé says, "I want to be with you in order to serve you, even when you don't return any love at all." Infatuation says, "I want to be with you because you make me feel good." Infatuation is, by definition, selfish. It's based upon "eros", it comes from you make me feel good. "emotion". It's exciting and it feels good, but it's a vapor. It can't sustain because it takes as much as it can and gives very little in return. It thinks it loves the other person and believes it will be like this forever, so it's self-deceiving; and it can fool both people for a while so that they believe that it's actually unconditional love that's going to last

forever. But when there's trouble between the two or affliction from the outside, infatuation has nothing to give. It will only demand from the other, or else it will cut and run; and the one who is trying to serve will find out how little love they actually have, how little love between them there actually was.

II. Jesus, Peter and Love

Why do I say all of this before we speak of the Gospel lesson? Because in verses 15-19 of John 21, the word "love" appears seven times in English; but it's not always the same word in the Greek. If we're going to make sense of those verses, we need to know which is which.

This text is about Jesus and Peter. Peter's always been known for strong opinions and impulsive behavior. The start of this Gospel lesson is one example, where Peter jumps into the water, fully-clothed, and swims to Jesus on shore because he can't wait for the boat to get there. Impulsive, impetuous...you can see that in Peter.

But especially for the final five verses of our text, consider Peter at the Last Supper. As Jesus spoke to His disciples and told them He was about to be betrayed, Peter declared, "I will lay down my life for You" (John 13:37). He said, "Lord, I am ready to go with you both to prison and to death" (Luke 22:33). And, speaking poorly of the other disciples, Peter pledged, "Even though they all fall away, I will not" (Mark 14:29-31). How did Jesus respond to all of this? He said, "Truly I tell you, this very night, before the rooster crows twice, you will deny me three times" (Mark 14:30); to which Peter promised, "If I must die with you, I will not deny you."

Bluster? Bravado? There was certainly some of that in Peter. But taking his words at face value, it seems clear that Peter really believed he was willing to sacrifice all—even his life—in order to follow Jesus. In other words, Peter believed that he loved Jesus—loved Him with an agapé love that would serve unto death. Just a few hours later though, it was proven that Peter had no agapé within him, no matter how good his intentions. Rather, his pledges to Jesus stemmed far more from desire, not love; and when the going got tough and sacrifice was required, Peter cut and ran. He denied Jesus three times and fled into the night, weeping bitterly.

Today, the final verses of our text are about Peter's restoration. Jesus says to Peter, "Simon, son of John, do you love Me more than these?" Remember, Peter said at the Last Supper that he would not abandon Jesus, even if the rest of the disciples did. So now, Jesus asks, "Do you love Me more than these?", and the word for "love" is agapé. In other words, "Simon, do you still say that you love Me completely sacrificially and selflessly, and more than the other disciples?" Peter responds and says, "Yes, Lord; You know that I love You." But when Peter says this, he doesn't use agapé—he uses the other word, from "philos." He says, "Lord, you know that I love you: not unconditionally and sacrificially as I should, but as I'm able to with my sinfulness and limitations." Peter isn't going to claim he's got that selfless, unconditional agapé love anymore. He's not fooling himself anymore. Jesus says, "Feed My lambs."

It happens a second time: Jesus asks, "Simon do you love Me" with agapé love? Peter again says, "Yes, Lord, you know that I love you" with that limited, philos kind of love. Jesus says, "Feed My sheep."

It happens a third time. Jesus says, "Simon, son of John, do you love Me?" Peter's grieved to hear the question a third time, but this time the question is different. Jesus uses "philos," not "agapé:" "Simon, do you love Me with that limited sort of friendship-love?" This time Peter

says, "Lord, you know everything; you know that I love You"—with the *philos*, limited love. And again, Jesus says, "Feed My sheep."

Before the crucifixion, Peter denied Jesus three times. After the resurrection, Jesus restores Peter three times. But there's more to it than that: in the three questions and answers, we find that Peter has changed. He's humbled. He knows he doesn't have the *agapé* love that he wants to have and is supposed to have, and apparently once thought he did have. He honestly admits that he can only summon up that limited, weaker *philos* love because he's a sinful human being. He's under no delusions about his ability to commit to Christ: he knows how weak he is when he trusts in his own love for Jesus. So he tells Jesus, "I love You, but I know now that my love for You can fail." In other words, Peter tells the truth.

And now, Jesus can use him. As long as Peter trusted in his own love for Jesus, he wasn't trusting in Jesus and His love for Peter. But that has changed. Peter knows that his faith and strength lie in Christ, not himself. Now he's ready to feed Jesus' lambs and sheep—believers of all ages. Furthermore, he is now able to endure persecution and remain faithful: Jesus goes on to say, "Truly, truly, I say to you, when you were young, you used to dress yourself and walk wherever you wanted, but when you are old, you will stretch out your hands, and another will dress you and carry you where you do not want to go." Jesus says this to show by what kind of death Peter is to glorify God. Tradition tells us that Peter was crucified upside down for being a Christian; rather than deny Jesus, he now was willing to submit to that death. This was not Peter's flawed love at work, but Christ's love for him; and Peter's faith—even to death—glorified God. Was the prediction of his martyrdom disturbing to Peter? Undoubtedly. But with that, there was also comfort, for Jesus was telling him, "When you truly face death for being My disciple, you will not forsake Me again."

Finally, Jesus says to Peter, "Follow Me." Peter's ready to follow, for he now trusts in Jesus and His love for him.

III. Perfect Love

The lesson is simple, but so important: you are not a Christian because of your love for Christ. You are a Christian because of Christ's love for you.

And Christ's love for you is perfect, unconditional *agapé* love. This is beyond dispute: the cross declares it to be so. We mentioned already Jesus' words, "Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends" (John 15:13). There is also Romans 5:8: "God shows his love (His *agapé* love) for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us." The cross is already done: Christ has died and Christ is risen from the dead. If He has died for all of your sins, there are none He hasn't died for that would keep you from being forgiven. And risen from the dead, He lives to give you that forgiveness and grace. Because His love is perfect, He will not fail to do so: that is why your salvation is sure.

On the other hand, if you are a Christian because of your love for Jesus, nothing is certain except uncertainty and doubt. Your attempts at *agapé* love will always be flawed because everything you do still has sin clinging to it. In your love for Jesus, you certainly cannot love Him perfectly; if you think you can, you are deceiving yourself. And if it is up to you, you can never be certain that you love Him enough.

A lot of practice with the church today is predicated on the idea that you are a Christian because of your love for Jesus, because of your dedication to Him. When that is the belief, then the job of the pastor is to work upon you until you feel a greater love for your Savior. This is hopefully to last until the following Sunday, or perhaps, midweek service before it

wears off and you need another recharge. This is not a good thing: it is emotional manipulation, teaching you that you are a Christian because of your dedication. For those involved in such churches, our worship will often appear dry and uninspiring because we don't attempt to manipulate emotions. All of this emotional emphasis is dangerous to faith: when you have sinned terribly, or when you are beaten down and cannot summon up feelings of dedication, you will feel as if God has abandoned you because you cannot love Him enough.

The more you believe that you're a Christian because of your love for Jesus, the weaker your faith will be. The Lord has little use for those who trust in their own love, because they will neither trust the love of God in Christ for salvation, nor will they teach that Gospel to others. That was Peter for a long time, blustering about his great love for Jesus rather than trusting in Jesus' great love for him.

It is likewise for us a good confession to say, "I love the Lord for what He has done for me, but it is far from a perfect love. Perfect love would keep the law perfectly: I do not. Perfect love would love the Lord with all my heart, soul, strength and mind; but I too easily chase after sinfulness and vanity without even thinking about it. Perfect love would love my neighbor as myself, but I often neglect my neighbor's need." This is hardly boasting, but an honest confession of how much we need the Lord's perfect love and grace for us.

His love and grace are yours. At your Baptism, He didn't ask you if you loved Him enough to be saved; He said, "I love you enough to join you to My death and resurrection—the death I died for you, and the resurrection to give you life." In the absolution, He doesn't say, "I forgive you for all of your sins...as long as you love me enough." He says, "I forgive you for all of your sins," and that grace sets you free from sin to love. He doesn't say, "I'll be present in My Supper if I sense enough dedication on your part;" He says, "Take and eat, take and drink, for the forgiveness of sins." No strings, no make-up work, no requirements beyond the faith and the pure confession that He gives. No conditions—because His love for you is unconditional. That is why salvation is yours, because in His unconditional love for you the Lord declares that you are forgiven for all of your sins.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen