

April 28 2024 Andrew's Sermon

As referenced in my opening poem, there are four words translated as “love” in the original Greek language of the New Testament, and the most famous is agape. Agape love is used in the reading from 1 John to describe God and also in John's Gospel, where Jesus says there is no greater agape than when a person lays down their life for another. Agape is sacrificial love—God so agape the world that God gave the only-begotten son. Perhaps you know this...

What I wish to add is that, while love can be abstract, agape is personal. In our reading, we heard that since God first agape us, we ought to agape each other. Person to person.

This text is often used at weddings, including Sara Botelho's just yesterday. She and Clay married at a huge Catholic church in Cary, where I arrived Friday evening for the rehearsal. With a simple role in the service, I was free to roam around the gorgeous sanctuary with its icons, statues, and stained-glass windows.

As is true of most Catholic churches, the baptism font was located at the entrance to the sanctuary rather than up front. The faithful reach into the water and apply a little to their foreheads upon entering as a reminder of their faith and baptismal vows to one another.

After the rehearsal, a man in jeans and a T-shirt walked up to the font with a bucket of soapy water. He might have been a janitor, perhaps a volunteer. I watched as he carefully emptied the font, then cleaned it with care and attention. I thought about how our ushers do the same every Sunday after this service. I'd call that a loving act of service.

Agape describes a love as huge as God and as small as what we do for one another, even the things we rarely notice. Agape is in the personal touches.

With the image of the vine, Jesus reassures his disciples and us that, though he is no longer in the world, he still abides in an active presence. Branches and vines provide a metaphor of connection. 1 John makes brings this

connection from the metaphorical to the personal: No one has ever seen God, but if we love one another, God lives in us. God abides in us.

This past week, I had the delight of watching the young performers at my children's elementary school talent show. In solos, duets, and trios, on the ukulele or the keyboard, the students performed songs from Taylor Swift, Beethoven, and Disney (going old school with "Under the Sea" from *The Little Mermaid*).

What I loved most were the bows after each act. Some performers had a dramatic flair; others were quick and formal. Still others were shy, with a hurried bend at the waist.

Curious about the origins of the practice of bowing after a performance, I learned that, like agape, this also dates back to the ancient Greeks. One pundit, an actor, wished to correct the usual phrase "take a bow," suggesting that "take" implied self-aggrandizement. Instead, we might say "give a bow," meaning to offer thanks to the audience. It's about acknowledging and appreciating the gift of connection.

As agape is also about giving. We love those who applaud or appreciate us. Yet, Jesus calls us to love everyone, including those with whom we disagree. We have to give of ourselves; this is sacrifice. Eddie Glaude Jr. writes:

"Americans find themselves in a moment of profound crisis. The country is changing, and the substance of that transformation is not clear. Americans are divided and those divisions go well beyond ideological differences. They cut to the marrow of the bone. Too often we see each other as enemies. The sense of common purpose and public good has been thrown into the trash bin as we huddle in our silos."

Where is our hope? Glaude adds, "The answer to the troubles in this country, as it has always been, rests with the willingness of everyday people to fight for democracy." This is what I would call the personal touch of agape.

"Abide in me," promises Jesus, "and I will abide in you." Abide in Greek (*meno*) gives English the word for mentor. A mentor shows us love in the

flesh, perhaps with advice, but most often by modeling simple ways of caring, which can have a larger impact on our community, even country.

One of my mentors, Bob Dunham, told a story about a mother who took her son to hear a renowned pianist. The young boy had only recently begun his piano lessons, and his mother wished to encourage him.

Just prior to the concert, she spotted a dear friend along the aisle a few rows back and went to speak to her, telling the boy to remain in his seat. But seizing the moment of opportunity, the boy made his way down the aisle and slipped through the curtain on stage.

When the houselights dimmed to start the performance, the mother returned to her seat only to discover that her son was not there! She began frantically to look all around the rows. But there, seated at the magnificent Steinway on the stage, was her son, who began to play “Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star.”

The mother was horrified, but at the same moment, the great pianist stepped onto the stage. She moved to the piano and whispered in the boy's ear. The boy kept playing, and then the master reached down with her left hand and began filling in a bass part to the composition. Soon the pianist's right arm reached around to the other side of the child, and she added a running melody. When the master and this young novice finished playing, the audience broke forth in thunderous applause. The pianist took the child's hand and together the unlikely duet *gave* a bow.

If we love one another, what sweet music we can make. For God abides with us. God is love, both noun and verb, neither reducible nor captured by types or forms, but free to create, engage, and inspire by any and every means possible, imaginable—beyond imaginable! Maybe there are as many types of love as there are notes on a piano, as stars in the sky.