

Beloved, Love  
A sermon for Pilgrim Church  
October 18, 2020  
Rev. Reebee Kavich Girash

*Psalm 86:12-13*

I give thanks to you, O God, my God, with all my heart, and I will glorify your name forever.

For great is your steadfast love toward me; you have delivered my soul from the depths of Sheol.

1 John 4:7-21

7 Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. 8 Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love. 9 God's love was revealed among us in this way: God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him. 10 In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins. 11 Beloved, since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another. 12 No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God lives in us, and his love is perfected in us. 13 By this we know that we abide in him and he in us, because he has given us of his Spirit. 14 And we have seen and do testify that the Father has sent his Son as the Savior of the world. 15 God abides in those who confess that Jesus is the Son of God, and they abide in God. 16 So we have known and believe the love that God has for us. God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them. 17 Love has been perfected among us in this: that we may have boldness on the day of judgment, because as he is, so are we in this world. 18 There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear; for fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not reached perfection in love. 19 We love because he first loved us. 20 Those who say, "I love God," and hate their brothers or sisters, are liars; for those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen. 21 The commandment we have from him is this: those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also.

Prayer  
Sermon

We're talking about the Bible in Confirmation class tonight, and particularly thinking of how to interpret the Bible in our own moment and context. One of the things we need to do in order to strengthen our understanding of this ancient text in our own context is to understand something about how the text got from then to now, how it got translated. And in fact you really have to remember that Jesus probably spoke Aramaic and Hebrew, but the Christian Testament was mostly written down in Greek, so the Greek is what we have to work with.

Now, you can do this yourself - it used to be that those not fluent in ancient Greek, such as myself, could use a concordance and a lexicon and a Bible dictionary and put together a few different resources that you'd spread out across your desk....and now we can use an online Interlinear Bible.<sup>1</sup>

Folks, let's dive into some Ancient Greek, hmm...?

Here we go.

I want to focus on two words in this passage:

LOVE

&

PERFECT

Love. All the way through 1st John, there's one Greek word that we translate *love* in English. And many scholars think that 1st John is itself a commentary on the Gospel of John, so it is no surprise that all of the commandments to love in the Gospel of John come from the same Greek word. But, there were at least five words for love in ancient Greek. *Philia*, love of siblings, love of friends. *Storge*, love of family. *Eros*, romance. *Philautia*, love of one's self. And the one we hear again and again in this text, *agape*.

Agape

God is *agape*.

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<sup>1</sup> Try it! <https://www.biblestudytools.com/interlinear-bible/>

We know God's agape through the incarnation of Jesus, who practiced God's agape most fully.

If God is agape perhaps we'd better know what agape means.

The translation is straightforward, actually: agape is the kind of love that exhibits good will and benevolence toward others.

But I want to move a little beyond the translation. Agape love, I propose, is a love that is other-focused and self-giving. Agape love is the same kind of love Jesus taught in the parable of the good Samaritan: who is our neighbor? Everyone. How shall we treat them? With agape love.

Agape love seeks the wellbeing of all people. God's agape love is life-giving and when we know that gift, we are called to practice the same kind of agape. "Because God lives in us, we embody God's love for the world....[we belong to God.]...[Today,] God's love is incarnate in us."<sup>2</sup>

Now, here's the other word we need to investigate.

PERFECT.

William Sloane Coffin once said, "The opposite of love is not hate; the opposite of love is fear."

17 Love has been perfected among us in this: that we may have boldness on the day of judgment, because as he is, so are we in this world. 18 There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear; for fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not reached perfection in love.

Perfect is translated from the Greek Telos which it turns out doesn't mean perfect at all. It means complete, to be fulfilled, or to have reached the goal.

Let's put it together in verses 17 and 18, the Reebee Standard Translation:

Other-focused and self-giving neighbor love will reach its goal among us in this: we will have boldness and courage and fearless confidence right now and on the day we are called to account. Because as Jesus is, so are we to be in this world. There is no fear

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<sup>2</sup> Judith Jones, Working Preacher Commentary on 1 John 4:7-21

in Other-focused and self-giving neighbor love, but love that has reached the goal can cast out fear with boldness and confidence.

God is love, and we know God's love through the incarnation of Jesus.

Jesus hit the sweet spot of loving everyone, and y'all, how did he do it? His love wasn't treachery or shallow, it was other-focused self-giving neighbor love that sought the wellbeing of everyone. Jesus loved even Pharisees, sinners and tax collectors, even a centurion or two, and did so while, in love, advocating for the wellbeing and dignity of everyone. He loved/advocated for the poor, the sick, the widowed, the oppressed, the hungry and the marginalized, even while loving/challenging the people who were responsible for or complicit in the systems of oppression: the Romans, the centuries, the chief priests. His love was not neutral. And because his love had reached its goal, it could cast out fear when it came time to be bold and courageous.

Judith Jones sums up Jesus' bold and other-centered love so well:

"Jesus ignored the limits that religious communities imposed. He ate and talked with people whom the religious leaders had rejected as heretics, as sinful, as filthy and despicable. He touched people who were considered untouchable and welcomed people whom everyone else had kicked out. His harshest words were reserved not for the impure, but for unloving, self-righteous people who saw some of God's children as beneath their attention and certainly as unworthy of their love. If Jesus shows us what God's love is like, then there can be no doubt how far our love for others must extend: to every single human being."

Having done some translation work, perhaps we're ready to bring this to our own context.

God is love, and we who have seen that love in the incarnation of Jesus are called into communities where we can practice that kind of love. In a community like this one, we get to practice other-centered love of neighbor when we take care of one another and find ways to bring joy and mercy and kindness even in the midst of a pandemic. But that is not enough, because we are not a club of joy and kindness and pumpkins, even though the pumpkins are awesome. We are a community called to corporately practice that agape, other-centered self-giving neighbor love. We're doing that when we're gathering food to feed the hungry, raising funds to cancel medical debt, supporting health care initiatives, supporting refugees, working against systemic racism and proclaiming black lives matter, and being part of a wider church that does more than we could ever do on our own. We're doing that when we are the place, as Whitney

reminded us last week, where someone feels welcome, at home, and supported when other places reject them. We're doing that when we care for God's beautiful creation, and we're doing that when we nurture God's beautiful children to know their belovedness and to love their neighbors. We're doing that, every once in a while, when we lovingly challenge one another to become more agape-loving.

I really can't quite figure out how Jesus did it. How did he love everyone and call everyone to be their best selves and stand up against systems of oppression? I don't know how he did it, I will tell you that this week I was too timid in places and too strident in others. I don't know how Jesus did it, but I think he must have figured out that Love is greater than Fear. Love, the central identity of God, agape love is gritty, determined, justice oriented and brave. Living from that kind of love, even in a moment when so many around him were afraid, traumatized and oppressed, he could claim an alternate vision of reality and call it (yes, here's the Greek again) the *basileia*, the realm, the kingdom of God. Jesus could say, God's reign of agape love and justice *are at hand*.

It's 2000 years later, and in this moment we face a pandemic of Covid19, a pandemic of white supremacy, a crisis of climate change, and an election that is making people anxious and vulnerable and fearful for those that they love. And even so, this is the good news:

Love has been perfected among us in this: that we may have boldness on the day of judgment, because as he is, so are we in this world. 18 There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear

When we don't know how to love, perhaps we can return to agape. That's the kind of love that allows us to transcend the places that confine us and make us afraid, and claim a new story, that God's reign is at hand and we will be part of building it up. That's the goal: a community practicing perfect love that can cast out fear, that other-centered self-giving justice oriented neighbor love that has come to fruition and can be practiced with courage in the face of fear.

Amen.