

John 15:9-17 "As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Now remain in my love. ¹⁰ If you obey my commands, you will remain in my love, just as I have obeyed my Father's commands and remain in his love. ¹¹ I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete. ¹² My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you. ¹³ Greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends. ¹⁴ You are my friends if you do what I command. ¹⁵ I no longer call you servants, because a servant does not know his master's business. Instead, I have called you friends, for everything that I learned from my Father I have made known to you. ¹⁶ You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you to go and bear fruit-- fruit that will last. Then the Father will give you whatever you ask in my name. ¹⁷ This is my command: Love each other.

"Love One Another"

What is love? It's probably the most misunderstood word in the English language. The problem is that we use the same word for a wide range of meaning. Love can be anything from a feeling with no action, a crush, to an emotional bond to an action with no feeling. The Greek language is more specific. It has four words for love. The first is *eros* from which we get the word erotic and which means romantic love. The next one is *storge* which is the bond of family. *Philos* from which we get Philadelphia means the bond of friendship. And finally, *agape* which is somewhat of the heroic sense of love, putting oneself aside in order to serve and better the position of others.

Agape is key to the Greek notion of love. *Eros* is nothing more than infatuation if it is not made complete by *agape*. *Eros* may be what gets us into a relationship, but marriage is built on *agape*. Families are families, brothers and sisters may fight like cats and dogs among themselves, but when an outsider hurts one of them, the whole family rises in defense. Parenthood isn't just having children to populate the planet or to insure you're cared for in retirement. It very often calls for sacrifice on the part of parents to do what is in the best interest of the children, rather than themselves. Friendship is nothing more than acquaintance if friends do not sacrifice for one another. In the Greek mind *agape* is what makes love to be love.

In John's gospel, *agape* is the word for love that Jesus most frequently uses. He uses *philos* as well, but not as frequently. Some would say he uses them interchangeably, but there is a subtle difference. In the last chapter of the gospel, Jesus resurrected meets the disciples on the shore of the Sea of Galilee and eventually confronts Peter about Peter's denial of him. He asks Peter, "Simon son of John, do you *agape* me more than these?" Peter responds, "Lord, you know that I *philos* you." Jesus commands him, "Feed my lambs." There is no such thing as *philos* or *agape* for Jesus if one does not lay down one's life for Jesus' disciples as Jesus the good shepherd has done. One may deny Jesus, but one does not desert his followers. Again Jesus asks him, "Simon son of John, do you *agape* me?" Peter again answers, "Yes Lord, you know that I *philos* you." "Take care of my sheep," Jesus tells him. Jesus is beginning to cut to the core of Peter's problem. Peter's *agape* for himself led to his denying

Jesus. To agape Jesus is to be more than just his friend, it is to lay down your life for his followers. A third time Jesus asks him, “Simon son of John, do you *philos* me.” He uses *philos* here rather than *agape*. This hurt Peter’s feelings. He responds, “Lord, you know all things, you know that I *philos* you.” Jesus commands, “Feed my sheep.” Then Jesus tells Peter he will eventually be martyred and commands him, “Follow me.” Peter felt a strong bond of friendship with Jesus. Yet, that friendship was meaningless unless Peter was willing to lay himself aside to tend to Jesus’ followers which would make his *philos* for Jesus complete with *agape*.

In the passage we read today Jesus commands us to agape one another, to lay ourselves and ambitions aside to follow him by serving one another. This is a difficult thing to do and indeed the fellowship of love in the Christian community is the heart of the Christian faith. Jesus did not come and die for us to get a bunch of people to decide to believe in him so they can go to heaven when they die. In, through, and as him the Trinity was and is making a new humanity, human beings indwelt by the Holy Spirit who are made able to *agape* one another in Jesus to show the world the Father’s *agape*. The Christian church is not a gathering of people who share common private beliefs about Jesus and who strive to live morally upright lives. It is the communion of people who have in various ways met Jesus Christ and experienced the love of God through him and are therefore now able to *agape* others as we know God through Jesus has shown *agape* to us.

This command to *agape* one another as Jesus himself has *agape*-ed us is a difficult task for John says at the very beginning of his gospel, “This is the verdict: Light has come into the world, but men loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil” (3:19). The word for love here is *agape*. Our tendency is to make sacrifices for what we perceive to be to our own benefit or gain. We are self-minded rather than communion-minded. Even when we think we are being God-minded we tend to use God for what we think is best for ourselves. Being truly God-minded is to show *agape* to one another in Jesus name. The light that has come into the world is Jesus, God the Son become human. He revealed to us that God is within himself *agape*. The Father in the Spirit unselfishly gives himself to the Son, and the Son likewise to and for the Father and as the Holy Spirit they give themselves to us unreservedly. In that giving they create among us new human community that is founded upon *agape* and itself becomes the light to the world. Loving, *agape*-ing one another is what church is all about. Love, *agape*, covers over a multitude of sins. There is still sin, evil, darkness in our lives but the love we share for one another covers it over. Here in the light, the love of Jesus purifies us, takes it away from us. Actually, the Greek word for purifies (and I’m quoting 1John 1:17 “But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from all sin.”) is *katharidzo* and it quite literally means to catheterize, to remove impurities from within. The love that we share in this fellowship is the vehicle by which Jesus cleans up our hearts. Participation in the loving community will lead us all to knowing God’s *agape* for us. Christian community is where God has chosen to make his *agape* readily available.

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Finally, Jesus command for us to agape one another places a huge re-prioritization upon our commitments. If we are the followers of Jesus and do want to know him then we must put the agape of our brothers and sisters in Christ before other commitments we have. One thing that I treasure about smaller churches is that agape stands more evidently at the fore of what we are about. In large churches it is easy just to come and get religiously self-edified only to get lost in the crowd and never discover Christian community. That's being God-minded in a selfish way. That's Christianity without agape. Friends let us not fall into that trap. Love one another. Amen.