

## *The “agape” heart*

### 1 Corinthians 13

Friends, we’re just a few days away now from the Church of the Brethren’s Annual Conference, and so this will be our final exploration of the scriptures and themes of this year’s conference.

And so we might again start by remembering where we’ve journeyed together so far. We considered Paul’s letter to the Ephesians, and the invitation to be imitators of God’s love, walking in the way of love. We then turned to John’s gospel, seeing ourselves as fruit-bearing branches on a vine, taking in the nourishment of Jesus’s words and bearing fruits of God’s love. Next we took up the parable of the good Samaritan, and considered what might get in the way of our being loving neighbors. And this week, we return to Paul’s writings, this time turning to his first letter to the Corinthians, and this remarkable passage of chapter 13 in which Paul meditates on the nature of love.

In this passage of Paul’s letter, Paul invites us to recognize agape love as the key element of our faith and our lives, that something without which we have nothing. Paul describes some of the characteristics of this agape love. And in this passage, Paul invites us to consider - what is this agape love, precisely, and how do we cultivate it in our lives? How do we become people who love this sort of agape way?

Well, let’s start by first reminding ourselves of where this passage fits in with the letter Paul is writing here

Paul is writing this letter to the church in Corinth after he had spent time with them there, helping them to establish and build up their burgeoning church community. Paul tells us in the first chapter of this letter that he’s received a letter to himself, from “some in Chloe’s household,” that prompted him to respond with this letter we read, 1 Corinthians. Paul tells us that the letter he received described disagreements and quarreling and division within the church at Corinth.

As we discover throughout Paul’s response, there are a number of ways that this strife is manifesting. We see how there are folks holding up their allegiance to one teacher or another as markers of division, saying “Well I’m a follower of Paul,” or “I’m a follow of Cephas” or “I’m a follower of Apollos,” all different teachers and guiding figures within this new faith movement. We see through Paul’s response how the church is facing tension about how to handle particular situations that are arising, like whether it’s acceptable or not to eat food that had been marked as offerings to gods outside of the faith. Paul’s letter further shows that the Corinthian church is facing conflict in how folks

are reacting to diversity within the church, particularly their diversity of spiritual gifts and talents and capabilities.

And then we come to this passage, which feels like such a pivotal section in Paul's letter. Paul tells us that everything is nothing without love; our charity, our faith, our worship, if it doesn't have this agape love, there's an emptiness or futility to it.

Love is the key.

Paul has given specific guidance on the particular tensions the church at Corinth is facing, but he's also saying here that at the end of the day, love is the answer to all these tensions as well. As we approach this year's Annual Conference, we might be mindful of some of the tensions within our denomination, and wonder if perhaps agape love is the answer to those conflicts as well.

In this passage, Paul is focusing his attention on agape love, and in doing so he gives us one of the most extended discourses on how exactly these early Christian communities thought about agape love, what it really meant to them. Agape love is one of those concepts so pivotal to our faith and so central in our calls to discipleship, yet at the same time sometimes challenging to define precisely.

Oftentimes we start to build a picture of agape love by starting with distinctions of types of love that agape *isn't*, building on the particular language and words for love in Ancient Greek or Koine Greek as this particularly dialect was called, these words for love that would have been familiarly used by many of the early Christians, including of course Paul who is writing his letters in Koine Greek. Agape love is frequently distinguished from eros love and philos love, but I'd like to bring in an additional type of love defined in Koine Greek as well.

So as we might recall, eros love describes romantic love or sexual love - that's not what agape love is.

We might also recall philos love, which describes the love of friendship, the love we have for someone which comes from the qualities we admire or enjoy in that person - that's not what agape love is either.

The third type of love I'd like to draw into our distinction here is I think less commonly referenced but still one perhaps we've heard of before, and that's storge love. Storge love in Ancient Greek describes the sort of love that arises naturally because of how another person is connected to us, how they fit in into our web of relationships and

groupings. Most commonly, storge love refers to the love within a family group. Parents tend to love their children precisely because they are their children, siblings tend to love one another precisely because they are siblings, and so on. Of course, tensions and resentments and pain can creep into our family relationships, but there's still that general tendency towards a sort of naturally self-arising love for one's family, even if that does get interrupted.

Now again, storge love is most commonly used to describe this sort of familial love, but that's far from the only place it can pop up. Storge love is at play whenever we have a natural upswell of affection or love for someone because of how they are connected to us, particularly within a group defined by insiders and outsiders.

What does that mean exactly?

Well let's imagine a bit of baseball. Let's imagine you're a Boston Red Sox fan; that might be easy for some of you, that might be painful for some of you to consider, but bear with me here. Let's imagine you're a Boston Red Sox fan going to a baseball game where they're playing against the New York Yankees, their rival team. Let's imagine the game is at Yankee stadium, where Yankee fans will far outnumber Red Sox fans. Let's further imagine this is game seven of the American League championship, so the stakes are really high.

So it's a high-stakes game, against your favorite team's rivals, at the rival's home field. So in this scenario, how do you imagine you might feel about the other people at the game rooting for the Red Sox, wearing Red Sox jerseys and so on?

Probably a great deal of naturally arising affection!

You'd smile when you see them, maybe wave, maybe share a hurrah back and forth, maybe even hug a stranger if the Red Sox win. Not because of any romantic love, not because they have personal qualities you're drawn to in friendship, but simply because they are connected to you in this group defined by insiders and outsiders. That's storge love.

We're coming up on July 4th, when our thoughts turn particularly towards the United States and our places within that country and its history. If we find ourselves feeling a particular kinship with other US residents, if we find ourselves feeling affection for other Americans simply on account of their being American - again, that's storge love.

Storge love shows up in our faith lives as well. The kinship and affection we might naturally feel upon meeting another member of the Church of the Brethren? That's storge love.

So okay, we have eros love, we have philo love, we have storge love. None of these are bad of course, none of them are wrong or are necessarily to be avoided. No, they each play their particular roles in human life.

But none of these are agape love

None of these are what exactly Paul is talking about when he says, "if I do not have love, I gain nothing." So what *is* agape love?

Well, Paul provides us with a great many characteristics of agape love here in this morning's passage. We're told this agape love is patient, kind, hopeful, perseverant. We're told this agape love is without envy, without anger, without resentment.

We have this list of qualities of agape love, but we can't really piece it together by just grasping at its constituent parts, could we?

I don't think we can just try to be patient, and then also be kind, and then be hopeful too, and, oh, make sure we aren't being envious or angry, and try to build up like that to agape love. That would be almost like eating a bowl of wheat flour for breakfast, some eggs and oil for lunch, and a bowl of sugar and frosting for dinner, and then saying to yourself, "Gosh, I ate a lovely cake today!" Some of the parts may have been there, but not the whole.

These characteristics flow from the source of agape love, they don't build up agape love as a sum of its parts.

So again, how can we grasp precisely what sort of love agape is?

Well, I think we might open the door by turning to 1 John 4:16, which reads: "We have come to know and to believe in the agape love God has for us. God is agape love, and whoever remains in agape love remains in God and God in them."

Agape love is God's sort of love; indeed as John puts it it's the sort of love that God *is*.

And what is God's love like?

Well, it's a love for *everyone*, all of humanity, indeed a love for all the non-human creatures and life as well. It's a love that is entirely without any self-serving ego; God doesn't love us because we can do something for God. It's a love that doesn't depend on us having particular friendship-inducing qualities or being part of a particular group of insiders; God loves at our best just as much as God loves us when we're struggling or falling apart or making mistakes.

So how do we cultivate this sort of love in our lives?

How do we start to better live out this agape love?

Because again, according to Paul's letter here, if we don't have agape love, we don't have much at all! According to Paul, if we're missing this agape love, then our worship, our charity, our faith, everything - it's all for naught

So how do we live with agape love?

Well again, 1 John 4:16 - whoever remains in agape love remains in God and God in them. We cultivate agape love by nurturing our relationship with God. Opening ourselves to experience and receive the overwhelming, grace-filled agape love that God has for each of us, personally and individually. We cultivate agape love by inviting God into our hearts and into our lives. We cultivate agape love by abiding in God, steeping ourselves in our experience of God's living presence, dedicating ourselves through our discipleship to Christ. We live out agape love by inviting the Divine into our hearts.

And so friends, as we move into the days ahead, let us do just that.

Let us open ourselves up to God's infinite, agape love. Let us invite Christ into our lives, let us abide in God. And as we do so, let us ourselves become beacons of agape love in this world. Let us love everyone, without condition and without limit, with kindness, patience, generosity, forgiveness, and compassion.

May our cups runneth over with this agape love, received from God and poured out through us into the world.