

Fourth Sunday after Epiphany  
Sermon text: 1 Corinthians 12:31b-13:13  
Date preached: January 31, 2016

Some of you may be surprised to learn that the Apostle Paul did not write 1 Corinthians 13 for the purpose of wedding services. It is certainly not meant to be received with sappy sentimentality akin to a first century Hallmark card.

It may surprise you to realize that this chapter is directed at a congregation on the verge of getting a divorce. Paul the marriage counselor is at work trying to preserve unity among competing attitudes, a carefree moral code prevalent in Corinth, elitism, bullying, and fears that traditional values are being destroyed. And this is with IN the church.

In other words, 1 Corinthians 13 is very much appropriate for the world today where unhealthy conflict, fighting, and sins of the flesh abound. In the midst of competing values and activist changes in culture, society, politics, and yes in the church, the same word is being used as justification. L O V E.

The word love has been high jacked to mean that anything goes. The emphasis on love as an emotion tied to one's feelings is seen as the highest good. To suggest that there may be boundaries for specific expressions of this love feeling may find one labeled

as intolerant, prejudiced, hateful, or just downright stuck in the past. As an example, the church teaches that a man and woman should first be married before living together to try things out as it were. Years later, sometimes only months go by before this love changes and the couple that gets married ends the marriage often in favor of a new love. In other words, the love felt was more along the lines of eros than agape.

There are four Greek words that can be translated into the English word “love”. The Greek Word throughout 1 Corinthians 13 is Agape. Agape is the Love that describes God’s very being. 1 John 4:7 “Ο Θεος αγαπε εστιν”. God is Love.

Such agape is what we are to have in our relationships, especially those relationships with our brothers and sisters in Christ. Such agape speaks the truth, calling us to repent of our sins, proclaim and receive the forgiveness that comes from Christ, and amend those things in our lives that need to conform to Christ.

For example, agape is to speak the truth that salvation is through Christ alone. Here the words of Acts 4:12. “And there is salvation in no one else, for there is no

other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved.”

1 Corinthians 12:3 made it clear that when saying “Jesus is Lord” we are speaking through the power of the Holy Spirit. It also places us under Jesus’ agape authority. Thus, where there is disconnect between God’s Word and our desires or wants, we trust in God’s wisdom for us.

Romans 12:2 reads, “Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable, and perfect.”

God indeed does reveal his will to us. Through the Scriptures we know God is patient and merciful. God is slow to anger and abounding in steadfast agape. Such steadfastness is in God’s nature to keep his promises to us even as we are unfaithful in keeping our promises to him, be they the 10 commandments, or the ones we made in our Baptism.

Agape is a noun in that it is synonymous with God. His agape is that we may come to him, embracing the gift of life Christ gave to you in your Baptism, linking you to his death and resurrection.

Agape is a verb in that it is how we are to live. In other words, love is not simply holding hands, singing Kumbyah, your okay, I'm okay. Agape acts.

Agape is the action of thousands who assemble in Washington D.C. amid frigid temperatures and the occasional blizzard to speak for the unborn, even as there are other brothers and sisters in Christ who feel that abortion is okay.

The agape of God looks to build up one another. We do that in how we treat one another. When there is conflict, and there is always going to be conflict in relationships as a result of our sinful nature, we lay aside the destructiveness that is arrogance, envy, boastfulness, resentfulness, rejoicing in seeing people fail and so forth.

We can and shall agape our neighbors even if we disagree with them on issues, how to solve problems, and the best ways to go about accomplishing tasks. We can and shall, as Jesus taught agape our enemies, even if such agape is not returned.

To quote a colleague of mine, Pastor George Warnke, "He is not commanding us to "have a good feeling" for our enemies, but to act in a loving way toward them. Agape love is related to obedience and

commitment, and not necessarily feeling and emotion. “Loving” someone is to obey God on another’s behalf, seeking his or her long-term blessing and profit.”

God loves you! God loves your neighbors! Live your life in such a way as to demonstrate the Agape of God in all our relationships. To do so is to be a follower of our Lord Jesus Christ. To do so is to be a witness to the agape of God, forgiving, reconciling, serving, and delighting in our freedom from the forces of evil.

Αγαπεσθη one another as Christ Jesus αγαπε you!  
AMEN.