

John 15:12-17 1 Corinthians 12:31 - 13:13 February 8, 2015
Preached by Philip Gladden at the Wallace Presbyterian Church, Wallace, NC

AGAPE AT AGÁPE

Let us pray: Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

Rev. George Anderson, Jean Parks' son-in-law, was our keynote speaker at last weekend's Sound Retreat at The Trinity Center at SalterPath. George's topic was "Conversations with Jesus in the Gospel of John."

George is a very creative and original person, with many acting skills and much performance experience. He recruited me and Nancy to be members of "The Sound Players" and to help him recreate several conversations from the Gospel of John. George wrote the scripts we used in these conversations. Typically the scene included a narrator, Jesus, and another character, such as Nicodemus the Pharisee or the Samaritan woman at the well.

Now, you need to keep in mind that George had written asides into his scripts, places where the narrator or the other character would "break character" and make additional comments. Much to George's chagrin, I think, sometimes I "broke character" even when he didn't intend for me to do so! Then again, George occasionally pulled some surprises of his own, such as adding lines to the script. His ad libs sometimes threw off the impeccable dramatic timing of the scene!

The final conversation took place between the risen Jesus (George) and Peter (me) around a charcoal fire on the beach. Here's a little bit of the conversation:

Narrator: When they had finished breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter,

Jesus: Simon son of John, do you love me more than these?

Peter: Yes, Lord; you know that I love you.

Narrator: Jesus said to him,

Jesus: Feed my lambs.

Narrator: A second time he said to him,

Jesus: Simon son of John, do you love me?

Narrator: He said to him,

Peter: Yes, Lord; you know that I love you.

Narrator: Jesus said to him,

Jesus: Tend my sheep.

Narrator: He said to him the third time,

Here's where George ad libbed just a bit — but it was an important ad lib. By now you're expecting to hear Jesus say (for the third time), "Simon son of John, do you love me?" In fact, that's what my script said. Instead, what George/Jesus said to me/Peter was, "Simon son of John, do you *agápe*/love me?"

Narrator: Peter felt hurt because he said to him the third time, "Do you love me?" And he said to him,

Peter: Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you.

Narrator: Jesus said to him,

Jesus: Feed my sheep.

Two things to notice here:

1. In English, we use the same word "love" to cover lots of territory: "I love to go to the beach" or "I love chocolate" or "I love my wife" or "I love my church" or "I love my grandchildren." We use "love" when we really mean "I very much enjoy" or "I really like" and we use "love" when we're talking about our deepest feelings and commitments to other people. Biblical Greek (the language of the New Testament) has different words for different kinds of love: *philos* (philanthropy — or even Philip), *eros* (erotic), and *agápe*.

2. Jesus "defines" *agápe* in his answers to Peter: **Feed** my lambs; **Tend** my sheep; **Feed** my sheep. *agápe* love means "love in action." This week I read a post from someone on Facebook that said, "Love is the fuzzy feeling you get when you see someone and they make you smile super big!" Well, maybe so, but that's not *agápe* love. In fact, *agápe* love means (requires?) us to love (look out for their best interests) even people who don't give us the fuzzy feeling, who don't make us smile super big!

Bill read some of Jesus' words from the Gospel of John this morning in Chapter 15. In my Bible, the heading for Chapter 15 is "The pattern of the Christian believer's life." The pattern is threefold: (1) The believer's relation to Christ; (2) The relations of believers to one another; and (3) The believer's relation to the world. Bill read about the relations of believers to one another, a relationship that can be summed up in one word — *agápe*/love.

* "This is my commandment, that you *agápe* love one another as I have *agápe* loved you." (John 15:12)

* "No one has greater *agápe* love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends." (John 15:13)

* “I am giving you these commands so that you may *agápe* love one another.” (John 15:17)

But before Jesus ***talked*** about *agápe* love with his disciples, he ***showed*** them *agápe* love: “[He] got up from the table, took off his outer robe, and tied a towel around himself. Then he poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples’ feet and to wipe them with the towel that was tied around him.” (John 13:4-5)

Of course, also after Jesus ***talked*** about *agápe* love with his disciples, he ***showed*** them *agápe* love as he lived out (and died out) John 15:13, “No one has greater *agápe* love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends.” As I reached this very point in writing my sermon on Friday morning, I heard on Pandora radio a beautiful arrangement for piano of “When I Survey the Wondrous Cross.” “See, from his head, his hands, his feet, sorrow and love flow mingled down; did e’er such love and sorrow meet, or thorns compose so rich a crown? Were the whole realm of nature mine, that were a present far too small; love so amazing, so divine, demands my soul, my life, my all.” Another Lenten hymn in the “Jesus Christ: Passion and Death” section of our hymnal says, “What wondrous love is this, O my soul, O my soul, what wondrous love is this that caused the Lord of bliss to bear the dreadful curse for my soul, to bear the dreadful curse for my soul.” Although both hymns are written in English, if you translated them into biblical Greek, you would use definitely use *agápe*: “See, from his head, his hands, his feet, sorrow and *agápe* flow mingled down . . . *agápe* so amazing, so divine, demands my soul, my life, my all . . . What wondrous *agápe* is this that caused the Lord of bliss to bear the dreadful curse for my soul . . .”

Some churches have *agápe* feasts as part of their worship. But, you don’t usually hear someone say, “I *agápe* you!” However, when I looked up *agápe* in *Webster’s New Collegiate Dictionary* to see if there is an English derivative, I was surprised to find an adjective, “agapeic” and an adverb, “agapeically.” They must mean something like “in a loving manner” and “lovingly.” More interesting, though, is that the definition of *agápe* as “love” or a “love feast” is the second definition of the word “a-g-a-p-e.” The first definition reads “wide open, gaping” and “being in a state of wonder.” “What wondrous love/*agápe* is this . . .” When we survey the wondrous cross of Jesus Christ, if we’re honest with ourselves and with God, we ought to be agape at *agápe*.

agápe/love is not talked about just between Jesus and his disciples. This morning I read the famous “love” chapter of 1 Corinthians 13. The apostle Paul uses the word *agápe* or its reference twenty-one times in

thirteen verses. He's not talking about "the fuzzy feeling you get when you see someone and they make you smile super big!" That's nice when it happens, but Paul is talking about the nitty-gritty, getting along, living together, looking out for each other kind of love in the Christian community. The footnote in my study Bible says, "This *love* is not love in an ordinary or general sense, but the love for others which is known within the church, inspired ultimately by the love of God in Christ for us through the Holy Spirit. . . *Love* is greatest because it endures when faith becomes sight and hope is fulfilled, with God who is love."

Did you use the margin note in today's bulletin to think about how our church will be different if we all live with *agápe* love? What would it mean for your life and mine and our community if people said this about us? "Wallace Presbyterian Church is patient and kind. Wallace Presbyterian Church is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. Wallace Presbyterian Church does not insist on its own way. Wallace Presbyterian Church is not irritable or resentful. Wallace Presbyterian Church does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. Wallace Presbyterian Church bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things." What difference would it make if people were agape at the *agápe* of your life and mine, of the Wallace Presbyterian Church, agape at the *agápe* of God showing and shining through how we live and what we do?

In 125 A.D., Aristedes, an Athenian philosopher who was converted to the Christian faith, wrote this description of the believers of his day: "They walk in all humility and kindness, and falsehood is not found among them, and they love one another. They despise not the widow, and grieve not the orphan. He that has distributes liberally to him that has not. If they see a stranger they bring him under their roof, and rejoice over him, as it were their own brother: for they call themselves brothers, not after the flesh, but after the Spirit and in God; but when one of their poor passes away from the world, and any of them see him, then he provides for his burial according to his ability; and if they hear that any of their number is imprisoned or oppressed for the name of their Messiah, all of them provide for his needs, and if it is possible he may be delivered, they deliver him. And if there is a man among them that is poor and needy, and they have not among them an abundance of necessities, they fast two or three days that they may supply the needy with their necessary food."

We sang it in worship three weeks ago . . .

We practiced it again in handbells on Wednesday night . . .

Let us hope and pray it is and will be true in our lives and in this church . . .

“And they’ll know we are Christians by our *agápe*, by our *agápe*; yes, they’ll know we are Christians by our *agápe*.”

Let us pray: God of love, we don’t see things clearly. We don’t understand fully the mystery of your presence in our lives. Yet you know us fully — you understand our struggles and believe in our gifts. May we place our trust in you and, in our love for one another, may the whole world know that we belong to you and come to rejoice in your love; through Jesus Christ. Amen.