

As we move into a time when more people are getting vaccinated and we can again begin to gather in-person, one of the things I am truly looking forward to is baptizing the children who have been born in our midst during this pandemic. Walter and Brenda Kopf's grandson, Garrett, will be baptized in two weeks, and Mark and Molly DeHate's son, Luca, will soon be baptized. As many of you know, I find baptisms to be one of the most meaningful things I do as I live into this call to ministry because in baptism we are shown how deeply and **unconditionally** we are **loved** by God, something that is communicated in all our scripture readings on this day.

In today's reading from Acts, Peter is astonished to discover the Holy Spirit falls **even** on those who are **Gentiles**, those considered "other." He then understands Gentiles **cannot** be denied the cleansing waters of baptism, new life, and God's **unconditional love**. And, in our second reading, the writer of 1 John tells us the unconditional love that comes from our Creator Parent, expressed through the person of Jesus and through the Spirit, is born in us as we **obey** God's commandment to **love**. Then, in today's reading from John's gospel, we find a continuation of the words we heard Jesus speaking last Sunday, and he again speaks about **abiding in** the **love** that is splashed all over us, love that will make our joy complete.

This whole section of John's gospel is known as Jesus' Farewell Discourse because he is preparing the disciples for his death. He knows he is going to die, and he knows he will be leaving them. In John's gospel, these words are some of the last words Jesus speaks during his earthly life, and his **last** words are all about **love**. Jesus speaks of his **love** for the disciples as he calls them **friends**. And, by extension, he speaks these words to each one of us saying, "As the Father has loved me, so I love you, and so you should love one another."

In our culture, the word "love" is highly ambiguous. However, in Greek, there are many different words for different **types** of love. The big challenge for us is that these multiple words become translated into English as just one word, simply the word *love*. In today's passage, the word that has been translated as *love* comes from the Greek word *agape*. *Agape* love describes the excellence of character that is God's very nature. It is all about relationship and it is the kind of love we find characterizing the relationship of the three persons of the Trinity. It is the kind of love in which **we** participate through sheer **grace**. *Agape* describes the Father's love for the Son and it describes God's love for us. *Agape* is all gift – a gift from God. *Agape* is **not** a feeling or inclination. It is the kind of love that responds as **obedience** to God's commandment to **choose** to love others

as God has **chosen** to love us. *Agape* love is always primarily interested in the **good** of the **other** person, rather than one's own self. It is never a love that attempts to possess or dominate others. The concern is always **for** others and *agape* is never domineering, manipulative, possessive, or subordinating. *Agape* love always allows authentic, genuine space for others to **be** and **become** and **grow**. And, it is **always** offered without reserve.

We live in a culture that is extremely individualistic, self-focused and self-serving, a culture in which love takes on possessive characteristics. In fact, there is frequently a tendency to view love as a commodity, even something that becomes a scarcity as some people begin to think others are receiving more love than **they** are. This is **never** what love is about.

We as a people have become very selfish, and far too often self-interest is placed at the top of any list of priorities. In fact, we have become a nation that has increasingly exemplified the characteristics of narcissism, as in *America first*, something that I pray is beginning to turn around. We tend to be people who talk about love as this warm, euphoric feeling inside, a feeling one has when one is with some special person. We talk about "making love." We throw the word *love* around and use it in cheap ways as we talk about loving objects like our house or our car, or something we

want to **get** or **possess**. Quite honestly, what we claim to love is often borne out of a consumer driven culture. But, when it comes to people and relationships with others, we can be rather stingy and self-serving about our love.

So, today it is fitting that Jesus' words break into our lives with a message of love, the love God has for this world and for **all** people. The love God calls us to live **into** every day is a very different kind of love. The nature of this love is **giving**. In fact, one might even say ***giving until it hurts***. That is the love Jesus was talking about and that is the love he lived. Jesus not only gave until it hurt, he gave himself over unto death on a cross, all for the sake of **love**.

When we live into this kind of love, it is a **choice**. We **choose** to love, and it becomes a way of life through which **we** become changed. To love in this manner means **obeying** Jesus' command to love. *Agape* love is a disciplined habit of care and concern, one that we work on perfecting over a lifetime as the living Word changes **us**, continually challenges **us**, takes **us** to new places, and continually makes **us new**. The love God shows toward **Jesus** is a demanding love, but it is also full of presence, promise and immeasurable joy. It is a love that prunes, cleanses, challenges, molds, and forms us. It is that kind of love that carried **Jesus**

throughout his ministry. And, guess what, my friends, it is that kind of love that carries us and holds us, and it is that kind of love **we** are called to live.

The love of God that we are invited into is a love **without** limits. It is a **wasteful** love. It is love that is selfless and thus produces and enhances life. In fact, this love we see in the person of Jesus Christ is a love that invites us into a whole **new** dimension of what it means to be human, a love through which we become more **fully** human and whole. When we live this kind of love, all those boundaries that establish status and power are reversed. When we live this kind of love, the boundaries that have been created to separate us from those considered “others” are obliterated. This love is a servant love that truly cares for **all** others.

Friends, God is **defined** as love. The love of God, the love we are called to live, is not an entity so much as it is an all-pervading, penetrating experience. It is experienced when we discover that God’s love embraces us **as we are**, and God’s love embraces **all** people **as they are**. We discover that we **cannot** create this kind of love, we can only **receive** it and then share it. This is the love that binds us to God and one another. And, this love is the very **meaning** of Jesus.

There is a story about Karl Barth, one of the great theologians of the twentieth century. Toward the end of his life, Barth made a tour of the

United States, where he had the opportunity to speak at several of our nation's top universities. During a question/answer time following one of his lectures, a student posed what seemed to be an impossible question to answer. The student asked, "Dr. Barth, you have written extensively on every aspect of theology and church history. I'm wondering if you could sum it all up in a short sentence or two." The room fell silent. Dr. Barth just stood there for a moment, carefully considering how to respond. Some of the professors and students who were there clearly began to feel awkward that such a minor question would be asked of such a brilliant scholar. Finally, Karl Barth turned toward the student and succinctly replied, "Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so."

Today, Jesus' last words to the disciples and each one of **us** are, "I've loved you the way my Father has loved me. Make yourselves at home in **my** love. If you keep my commands, you'll remain intimately at home in my love. That's what I've done – kept my Father's commands and made myself at home in his love. I've told you these things for a purpose: that my joy might be your joy, and your joy wholly mature. This is my command: Love one another the way I loved you. This is the best way to love. Put your life on the line for your friends."