



A certain medieval monk announced he would be preaching next Sunday evening on "The Love of God."

As the shadows fell and the light ceased to come in through the cathedral windows, the congregation gathered. In the darkness of the altar, the monk lighted a candle and carried it to the crucifix.

First of all, he illumined the crown of thorns, next, the two wounded hands, then the marks of the spear wound.

In the hush that fell, he blew out the candle and left the chancel.

There was nothing else to say. (sermonillustrations.com)

Our passage today is a continuation of The Last Supper, and, in order to give context, Jesus has just finished washing his disciples' feet, he knows who is going to betray him but offers Judas the first Eucharist. Judas leaves and the passage ends with "and it was night."

Rev. Alyce McKenzie frames the reading:

"This short text from John's gospel is like a glowing candle in the darkness, a command to love one another amid the realities of violence and betrayal as a continuation of Jesus' ministry in the world. These verses serve as an introduction to Jesus' Last Discourse with his disciples in John. They contain distinctive themes of John's gospel: glorification, departure, and the command to love one another as a sign of discipleship to the world. They are sandwiched between Jesus' prediction of Judas' betrayal (13:21-30) and Peter's denial (13:36-38)."

The command to love one another in this text is like a candle in a dark and brutal world, in danger of being blown out by the betrayal of Judas that precedes it and the denial of Peter that follows it." ([April 22, 2013, pathos.com](http://april22.2013.pathos.com))

Jesus does not talk about Judas, but instead centres on his mission and preparing his disciples for what is to come. In just a few hours, he will be handed over, tried, beaten, and crucified...all for us.

I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. (v 34)

Jesus' original disciples literally followed him. They left their homes, their livelihoods, even their families, to accompany him as he travelled around teaching and healing.

The initial focus of his three years of ministry was to follow him. Now, on the eve of his death, he gives his disciples a new commandment to love one another. It's not that they would no longer be Jesus followers or that loving one another was a new idea.

It's that their focus would shift from physically following Jesus to loving one another. They would follow Jesus *by* loving one another.

The type of love John describes is *agape*, from the Greek. Essentially, it is defined as unconditional, willful or selfless, and charitable. (*The following definitions from Agape Love Is A Command, 4Love Series, christchurch.us*)

Agape love is unconditional: It does not seek a return. It is love for love's sake. It does not seek a return or reward on investment.

There is no conditional statement, no "if, then" clause in the sentence. It exists for its own sake and does not operate out of need.

Agape love is willful or selfless: A conscious decision to promote the good of another

Agape love is charitable: It enables us to love what or who is deemed unlovable. English Philosopher, G.K. Chesterton is famous for his defence of fairy tales. He said, "There is the great lesson of 'Beauty and the Beast,' that a thing must be loved before it is lovable." (*The Ethics of Elend, Orthodoxy, 1908*)

The final phrase in Jesus' commandment is the essential one. Agape love is one of action: Jesus commands His disciples in verse 35, "By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another." We, too, are to follow this commandment as disciples of Jesus. Love is supposed to be the defining characteristic of our lives as Christians.

And we show that love here: the kind of love that shares time, resources, hopes, and prayers. Of what loving with a servant heart actually looks like. Love lived out through our parishioners who build up our community, support those of us who are in need, and those who simply walk alongside us. Pope Francis says that love is "constant caring for others."

I don't think I would have become a member of Christ Church if it hadn't been for the warm welcome from you, our church community, the welcome first offered by Maureen Greenwood on Palm Sunday thirteen years ago. And every Sunday, Sharon greets me with a smile and, finally, once again, a half pot of brewed coffee before the service! Sharon, whose friendship and support I treasure. She reads my homily drafts and provides feedback, especially on the stories I like to include. Without fail, Lillian greets me silently with a hand on my shoulder as she passes through Jenkins Hall, not disturbing our choir practice.

And when I first shared my personal story on March 5, 2017, it was an unscripted insert of my homily on *Temptation*. That heavy burden was lifted off my shoulders and I walked straight-backed for the first time in years. As we, the choir, left the chancel, Connie Woodcock turned to me and hugged me tightly. What a wonderful sign of love!

Many times I have referenced my sobriety journey in my reflections, and I am deeply moved by the love – a gesture like Bob Reid's thumbs up as he passed me on his way

to receive Communion, seeing a hand wiping away tears on the Zoom screen following my sermon on *The True Vine*, with an afternoon phone call of thanks and shared personal stories from another, and here, hands grasping mine, gentle hugs, the smiles, words of thanks after the Dismissal from many of you...

The welcome I receive, as well, at St. George when I lead Morning Prayer...such heartwarming support and encouragement...

I feel so blessed to be a part of this congregation and parish that is alive in Christ! I am so very grateful to experience your *agape* love.

Jesus commanded us to love, and his final act of love, that of his crucifixion, was to show that God is love and that we, as God's children, are loved.

We are the beneficiaries of God's love, his *agape* love. It is only by receiving our Father's *agape* love that we can discover an *agape* love for others.

And, as I often do, I would like to close with another story:

The little boy followed his mother everywhere she went. Every time she turned around, there he was and she would trip over him. She tried giving him fun activities to do; but he simply smiled and said, "I'd rather be with you."

After stepping on his toes repeatedly, the mother was about to lose patience when she asked why he was doing this.

He answered, "Well my Sunday School teacher said to walk in the footsteps of Jesus. But, I can't see Him, so I'm walking in yours."

Walking in the footsteps of Jesus by loving as Jesus loved....

Jesus says the world will know we are His followers by our love, not by reciting scripture, not by attending church, not by the amount of money we give.

Christ Jesus wants his followers to be known for the way they love each other. (*Known by Loving*, G Bailey, 2010, sermoncentral)

Amen

