

“Rooted and Grounded in Love”

As I studied the Scripture in preparation for writing this sermon based on our Reading, several thoughts came to my mind. One is remembering a song, which was sung by Diana Ross, Aretha Franklin, and others. It was originally composed by Valerie Simpson and Nickolas Ashford in 1966. Do you recall the one I am thinking of? The lyrics Aretha Franklin sang are:

“Now if you need me call me
no matter where you are,
no matter how far (don’t worry baby)
just call out my name
I’ll be there in a hurry
you don’t have to worry

’Cause baby there
Ain’t no mountain high enough
Ain’t no valley low enough
Ain’t no river wide enough
To keep me from getting to you babe

Remember the day
I set you free
I told you could always count on me, darling
From that day on
I made a vow
I’ll be there when you wanted
some way, somehow

’Cause baby there
Ain’t no mountain high enough
Ain’t no valley low enough
Ain’t no river wide enough
To keep me from getting to you babe”

**“No wind, (no wind)
No rain, (no rain)
Or winter’s cold.
Can stop me baby.
Oh baby
Cause you are my goal
If you’re ever in trouble
I’ll be there on the double
just send for me babe**

**My love is alive
Deep down in my heart
Although we are miles apart
If you ever need a helping hand
I’ll be there on the double
just as fast as I can
don’t you know that;**

**there ain’t no mountain high enough,
ain’t no valley low enough,
ain’t no river wide enough,
to keep me from getting to you babe ...” (Composed by Valerie Simpson and Nickolas Ashford)**

I tried to find out the meaning of the lyrics – about its story but I got nowhere in my search. I suspect those words were about a romantic context but since I couldn’t definitely find out what the meaning was otherwise, I’d like to assume – maybe in a wish fulfillment manner, those words are about a parent’s love for a dear child – perhaps like our Divine Parent’s Agape Self-Giving and Sacrificial Love for us – for God’s Children! In the lyrics of the song, the singer announced she made a vow to be there for her “babe” – her loved one.

In our Scripture, **Paul prays and reminds us in verses 18 -19b, “so that you, together with all God’s People, may have the power to understand how broad and long, how high and deep, is Christ’s agape love. Yes, may you come to know his agape love — although it can never be fully known”**. Those are parts of the Reading, which remind me of the lyrics from the Franklin song. Notice the “high” and “deep” references. Since Jesus Christ, the Son of God, is the ultimate manifestation of God’s Agape Love for us, perceiving the magnitude and depth of “Christ’s agape love” powerfully reveals the nature of the Divine Parent’s Agape Love for all of us – God’s Children!

Our Reading also reminds me of some words from the Jewish Wisdom Tradition. Some denominations, such as the Roman Catholic Church, recognize some books between the times of the Old Testament and the New Testament to be sacred Texts. Those writings are called The Apocrypha. In The Apocrypha, is the book, Sirach or Ecclesiasticus. The Apostle Paul would have certainly been familiar with that book. Indeed, it seems to me Paul echoed some of Sirach in our Reading, however, our Scripture focuses on Agape Love, while Sirach wrote about the closely related Wisdom. **For example, in Chapter 1, verses 1- 9 of Sirach, it is written:**

**“All wisdom comes from the Lord,
and Wisdom is with Him forever.
Who can count raindrops or the sand along the shore?
Who can count the days of eternity?
How high is the sky? How wide is the earth?
How deep is the ocean? How profound is Wisdom?
Can anyone find answers to these questions?
Wisdom was created before anything else;
understanding has always existed.
Has anyone ever been shown where Wisdom originates?
Does anyone understand her subtle cleverness?
There is only One Who is Wise,
and we must stand in awe before His Throne.
The Lord Himself created Wisdom;
He saw her and recognized her value,
and so He filled everything He made with Wisdom.”**

Clearly, Paul had come to adopt the same understanding about the place of God’s Son – the embodiment of the Almighty’s Agape Love, as we have also seen in the First Chapter of the Gospel of John – the creative source of God manifested in “The Word – The Logos”. I am not surprised about that, since Paul’s Letter to the Galatians reported he consulted with a few of Jesus’ original disciples, including John, the Son of Zebedee. Connecting Christ – God’s Agape Love to his importance for our everyday lives, Paul wrote to the Ephesians and us for that matter in **verse 17, “I pray that Christ will make his home in your hearts through faith. I pray that you may have your roots and foundation in agape love”.**

Having our “roots and foundation in agape love” – knowing Jesus Christ’s agape love calls for us to follow Jesus’ loving example or put another way, it calls for us to take on that Agape Love aspect of our Divine Parent, as Paul elaborated in **verse 19c, “— and so be completely filled with the very Nature of God.”**

So, what does that mean? Perhaps one way to put it is to describe what it isn’t – even though some folks are convinced it is or should I say they expect and hope the meaning of God’s Agape Love is what they want it to be. For example, after the Supreme Court of the United States ruled same sex marriage is legal throughout the nation in late June and I announce the Trustees and the Deacons have agreed to the policy of allowing all lawful marriage ceremonies to be held in our facilities, it came to my attention some folks in our society were using the adage “love the sinner but hate the sin”. That type of love is not the Agape Love of God, which Paul encouraged the Ephesians and us to be filled with.

Recently, I read a devotional by Rev. Matthew Laney, the Senior Minister of Asylum Hill Congregational Church, UCC, in Hartford, Connecticut. He titled it **“Love the Sinner, Hate the Sin?”** Laney wrote, “I’ve never been a fan of the dictum: ‘Love the sinner, hate the sin.’ It always struck me as a way to feign love for someone right before kicking them in the teeth.”

Continuing, Laney states, “And even if we could separate ‘the sin’ from ‘the sinner,’ the fact that both are damnable categories makes it extremely unlikely that a loving response will trump a hateful one. Hate, in this case, gets the last word.”

Laney deduces, “And since this phrase has been directed at LGBTQ folk far more than anyone else, well, that only puts a bigger bee in my bonnet. It is SO time to drop the hate. Especially theological hate, the most lethal kind of all.”

Laney shares, “And yet, following the Supreme Court’s affirmation of marriage equality last month, I’ve found myself invoking this ill-conceived phrase more often than I care to admit. Why? Because I’m doing my darndest to love those who are sinning boldly in their amped up condemnations of same sex relationships and marriage while claiming to be the new persecuted class due to their less inclusive beliefs.”

Laney concludes, “And (duh) it’s not working. I’m not becoming more loving and less scornful. I’m riding the same high and haughty horse as any other crusading love-hater. Maybe I should try something else.” **Laney suggests, “Maybe I should do what Jesus did, love the sinner and love the sinner some more, and pray the prayer he prayed: ‘Father, forgive them for they know not what they do.’”**

As the Apostle Paul told the Ephesians and us to be Rooted and Founded in Love, remember also, **Jesus told his disciples in John 13:34-35, during their last night together before his death, “And now I give you a new commandment: agape love one another. As I have agape loved you, so you must agape love one another. If you have agape love for one another, then everyone will know that you are my disciples.”**

Remember, while we were yet still sinners, Jesus died for us! Recall also, Paul called the Ephesians and us to **“understand how broad and long, how high and deep, is Christ’s agape love. Yes, may you come to know his agape love — although it can never be fully known — and so be completely filled with the very nature of God.”** So, following Jesus Christ’s example and commandment to serve and agape love one another and being “completely filled with the very nature of God”, let us intentionally be **Rooted and Founded in Agape Love!** Amen