

*“Self-Aggrandizing or Self-Giving?”*

I have no doubt, some of our long term members have heard me preach about Agape Love on numerous Sundays. Today’s Lectionary New Testament Epistle Reading from 1 Corinthians uses the Greek word “agape” a multitude of times. **In our Pew Bibles “agape” is translated as “love”.** In Greek, there are a significant number of different words which are usually translated in English by the word “love”. Although today’s Scripture is frequently used in wedding ceremonies, the love, which was repeatedly used in the Reading, does not specifically refer to romantic relationships. **However, it is still a good Text to include in a wedding ceremony because all relationships are improved when “agape love” is practiced by the persons involved in the relationship.**

Through the verses of this Reading, the Apostle Paul discussed “agape love” in a special context. **For example, Paul summed up the importance of “agape” love in verse 13, “Meanwhile these three remain: faith, hope, and [agape] love; and the greatest of these is [agape] love.”** Since few of us use the term “agape love” in our daily lives, it might be of help to raise up some examples of “agape love” prior to closely examining today’s Scripture. The Scouting Program encourages “agape love” ways of living without specifically using that term. During the past 7 years, one very notable person has periodically talked about “agape love” without using the term. Contrary to prominent conspiracy theorists, he is not a Moslem, in fact, for many years he was a member of one of our sister churches, Trinity United Church of Christ. **This former UCC member frequently makes comments, which indicate he is very familiar with the way many United Church of Christ congregations, such as ours, talk about God’s Agape Love – especially through the God is Still Speaking emphasis.**

The following quotes from the most recent State of the Union Address came at the conclusion of that message. President Obama lifted up examples of speaking and living “agape love” when he said, “Voices that help us see ourselves not first and foremost as black or white or Asian or Latino; not as gay or straight, immigrant or native born; not Democrat or Republican; but as Americans first, bound by a common creed.”

**“Voices Dr. King believed would have the final word — voices of unarmed truth and unconditional love.”** The President continued, “And they’re out there, those voices. They don’t get a lot of attention. They don’t seek a lot of fanfare, but they’re busy doing the work this country needs doing.”

“I see them everywhere I travel in this incredible country of ours. I see you, the American people. And in your daily acts of citizenship, I see our future unfolding.”

“I see it in the worker on the assembly line who clocked extra shifts to keep his company open, and the boss who pays him higher wages instead of laying him off.”

“I see it in the Dreamer who stays up late at night to finish her science project, and the teacher who comes in early, maybe with some extra supplies that she bought, because she knows that that young girl might someday cure a disease.”

“I see it in the American who’s served his time, made bad mistakes as a child, but now is dreaming of starting over, and I see it in the business owner who gives him that second chance; the protester determined to prove that justice matters; and the young cop walking the beat, treating everybody with respect, doing the brave, quiet work of keeping us safe.”

“I see it in the soldier who gives almost everything to save his brothers, the nurse who tends to him until he can run a marathon, the community that lines up to cheer him on. It’s the son who finds the courage to come out as who he is, and the father whose love for that son overrides everything he’s been taught.”

“I see it in the elderly woman who will wait in line to cast her vote as long as she has to; the new citizen who casts his vote for the first time; the volunteers at the polls who believe every vote should count, because each of them, in different ways, know how much that precious right is worth.”

Beginning to close, President Obama declared, “That’s the America I know. That’s the country we love.” **“Clear-eyed, big-hearted, undaunted by challenge, optimistic that unarmed truth and unconditional love will have the final word.”** “That’s what makes me so hopeful about our future.”

The President continued, “I believe in change because I believe in you, the American people. And that’s why I stand here, as confident as I have ever been, that the state of our Union is strong.”

The President then concluded, “Thank you, God bless you, and God bless the United States of America.” (2016 State of the Union Address by President Obama)

How is Agape Love different from the way most people live out their everyday lives? **The Apostle Paul provides insight by contrasting living in a self-aggrandizing way with living in the self-giving “agape love” manner. In verses 1- 3, the Apostle wrote about three of these situations.** For each one, Paul first stated a self-aggrandizing life aspiration and, then, the result of such living without self-giving “agape love”. Please note, I have underlined the part of each verse, which provides the result of living without self-giving “agape love”:

***“I may be able to speak the languages of human beings and even of angels, but if I have no [agape] love, my speech is no more than a noisy gong or a clanging bell.***

***I may have the gift of inspired preaching; I may have all knowledge and understand all secrets; I may have all the faith needed to move mountains — but if I have no [agape] love, I am nothing.***

***I may give away everything I have, and even give up my body to be burned — but if I have no [agape] love, this does me no good.*** In verses 1-3, the Corinthian Christians are told their lives are mere noise, nothing, do no one good, if they live for self-aggrandizement and do not live “agape love”!

Just in case the reader and/or hearer doesn’t quite understand the difference between the self-aggrandizing life and the self-giving “agape love” life, the Apostle went on in **verses 4 – 8a** to specifically contrast and characterize the self-aggrandizing life with the self-giving “agape love” life:

***“[Agape] Love is patient and kind; it is not jealous or conceited or proud;***

***[agape] love is not ill-mannered or selfish or irritable;***

***[agape] love does not keep a record of wrongs;***

***[agape] love is not happy with evil, but is happy with the Truth.***

***[Agape] Love never gives up; and its faith, hope, and patience never fail. [Agape] Love is eternal.”***

I wonder if the Christian folks in Iowa will be using this Lectionary Scripture Reading to evaluate the Presidential Candidates for Monday’s Caucuses.

For that matter, as we examine our own lives, are we manifesting self-giving “agape love” or self-aggrandizement? Do we really trust God’s Agape Love manifested in our Divine Parent’s Son, Jesus the Christ? Are we willing to set aside self-aggrandizement and to follow, instead, Jesus’ example of agape self-giving and sacrificial love? As our Savior showed radical and extravagant hospitality to everyone – even the outcasts, the foreigners, the ill, and those considered sinners by the legalists – the Pharisees, Teachers of the Law, and the Priests, so we are to also show self-giving agape love through our welcome and radical extravagant hospitality.

**After reminding us that we wait for the fulfillment of the Kingdom of God and the total revealing of the Truth, Paul punctuated his revelation about the superiority of self-giving agape love over self-aggrandizement by concluding our Scripture in verse 13, “Meanwhile these three remain: faith, hope, and [agape] love; and the greatest of these is [agape] love.”**

Kathryn Matthews of the UCC Weekly Seeds wrote about how we fulfill our calling, “in the life of the church, when we have the opportunity to welcome every child of God into our midst and invite them to the feast of love at our table, when we invite them to join us in this journey of love, accepting our heartfelt commitment to follow in the way of the One who is love.”

Matthews went on to write, “Our churches ought to be the beginning-again places of love, and the love we offer should be a spiritual gift in itself, a gift of healing and hope, a promise of what could yet be in their lives, and in the life of the church because they are now there, too.” Matthews concluded, **“In this case, the gift of extravagant hospitality can be seen as one more expression of love.”** (Reflection by Kathryn M. Matthews)

Today is a good day to choose between self-aggrandizement and self-giving agape love! Will you and I commit ourselves to following Jesus’ example and our calling? **Will we heed Paul’s counsel and live “agape love” with it being central to our sharing our spiritual gifts?** Yes, they will know we are Christians by our self-giving “agape love”! Amen.