



CHRIST CHURCH CRANBROOK

"You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. You shall love your neighbor as yourself."

I speak to you today as a sinner to sinners, as the beloved of God to God's beloved, as one called to bear witness to those called to bear witness. Amen.

Last week Yale Divinity School had a special memorial service for my dissertation director, Gene Outka. He was the Sterling Professor of Divinity there and was an incredible force in the academic world and in my life. He was the person who read, marked, inwardly digested, and spit back complete advice regarding my dissertation. And I would never have finished my dissertation if it wasn't for Gene.

I had an interesting relationship with him, and I think many of us did. He was an incredibly formal man. He was Lutheran. He came from Sioux City, South Dakota, moved to Yale Divinity School, and he was elevated there. They found his approach to be amazing. But this meant that he didn't remember my birthday, nor did he ever expect me to remember his, or things like that. We had lunch twice: when I started my dissertation and when I finished.

What he did do is he took his work as a teacher and scholar seriously, and he took my work as a teacher and scholar seriously. And after I would send out each chapter of my dissertation, which we did by mail - this is before email had really come to be trusted. Of course, we don't trust email anymore either - I would sit by the postbox and wait weeks until he sent back his comments. They would arrive in this tattered envelope. I would go to my office and I'd cut it open and this waft of odor of pipe smoke would just come out from inside. I'd pull it out and it was like permeating every page. And yes, I picked it up and smelled every page.

On every page there was red writing on every sentence. That was the kind of dissertation director he was. And I thought I was unusual for that, but until I was talking to another one of his students and I said, did you ever notice the papers would come back just smelling so much like pipe smoke? And she said yes, and I would go [inhales] and I thought wow, okay two of us.

Gene showed me love. And I only now sometimes recognize that He took what I did seriously He took my work seriously. He took me seriously. This was a

professional relationship. I was entering a profession. Gene had banked his entire life on love. His writing and research was on agape. And this was a movement in theology that argued that what was special about Christianity could be found in the relationship to God and others, the love that we showed God and others and that God showed us through agape.

And the argument is that you can find in antiquity and in life the love of eros. Eros is the root of the word erotic, but it means more than just erotic. It means any kind of love of appraisal. Any kind of love where you are taken in by the quality of the beloved, whether that beloved is a painting or a landscape or a lover, eros always appraises value in the other. And interestingly enough, eros does not appear in the New Testament. The New Testament does sometimes speak of philia, which is the love that is of friendship, from which we get the term filial. Philia is a kind of bond that you sometimes speak of and see in the New Testament. It is the kind of glue that holds a community together. Like when we volunteer in some capacity, you develop this shoulder to shoulder intimacy.

That's mentioned a bit in the New Testament, but agape is special. In the Gospel of John, when we read in John 3:15 that "God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son Jesus, that whoever believes in him should not perish, but have eternal life," the word that is used is agape. Agape is used at the end of the Gospel of John when Jesus and Peter are having this exchange on the beach after His resurrection. And when they're going through that graced confrontation between Jesus and Peter, Jesus asking him three times, do you love me, that shadows the fact that Peter three times denied him as Lord, the word that Jesus uses is agape. Peter, do you love me? Agape. And Peter's response, Lord, I love you, is philia. Lord, I like you. You're my friend. Not enough.

Because agape actually confers value onto the other. It doesn't find value. It doesn't appraise value. It doesn't say this is beautiful. Agape confers value on the other and says you are beautiful because you are beloved. Eros is a ladder that draws us higher and higher, so says Plato and many philosophers. Agape is a flow like a river. It's like water running downhill. It comes from God and works out through us into the world around us. Agape is spontaneous. Eros is incremental. Agape bears with the other and considers their needs as more important than any value that we would claim they had.

Gene believed that the answer to our social problems was agape. He came up with a term that somehow got mirrored in many other theologians and philosophers and made its way into wider society. He came up with the term "equal regard" and "unqualified regard." That is what agape means at a social level. That means each of us is equally regarded as lovable and beloved by God

and by others through agape. And he banked his life on it, and I believe he has the right to do so.

Agape means that a child who lives in Gaza is as beloved and as valuable as a child who lives in Israel, as a child who lives in the United States, as a child who lives in Honduras. Agape claims that we have this connection and that the work of life is to lean into that connection. Gene believed that that was the answer that we were all looking for in our lives and in our work at every level.

Reinhold Niebuhr loved agape so much that he made it the stuff of eternity. He said it's something that is this impossible ideal and that we, in the meantime, just have to make our way picking around it and finding our way in little steps. And Martin Luther King, he believed that agape wasn't impossible. He believed that agape was real and was already here. It was surrounding us and all we had to do was to acknowledge its power and follow its mandates and life would be transformed. And the question you and I have to ask today is which form of agape is God calling us to follow? Is it an impossible ideal, or is it something that you and I have to hold on to with all our might, with everything we have, now more than ever, and to lean in?

Our reading today from Matthew represents one of the only times in Matthew's gospel where he uses the word agape. It arises right as Jesus is starting to feel the noose around his neck. Right at the moment in which Jesus is aware that he is going to be crucified so that the Kingdom of God would come in a new way. It's right at the moment he is just getting ready to be betrayed. And a lawyer asks a question about the law and Jesus responds by speaking out those words of agape. The way to read the hundreds of laws in the Hebrew Bible is through the lens of love. This is embedded in the Hebrew Bible, of course, but by elevating it, Jesus created a kind of strategy for reading that He wanted us to follow, that was writ on the signature of Jesus's own life. Because Jesus and Matthew is love incarnate.

So that strategy of reading is something that has informed us for generations. We forget it sometimes. We get focused on the trees and not the forest. But when it comes to a point, when push comes to shove in the church, we have always opted for agape. We've always opted to include and embrace and welcome. And I believe the church does that right every time it does so.

St. Augustine in *De Doctrina Christiana*, book four, if you're looking it up at home, written sometime at the turn of the 5th century, he put it this way, if anyone makes a mistake in scripture, but follows the rule of love, they are like a traveler who somehow wandered away from the path and got lost, but yet somehow found their way home because love would lead them there. And so Augustine had no worry about misinterpreting the scriptures so long as the rule of love was followed.

This strategy for reading is also a strategy for living. Gene and I had cause to argue over many things. I saw things as more complex than he did, and I'm learning the wisdom of simplicity. And one of the things that that strategy for living speaks to is the fact that agape is a kind of banking on the future when you look at today's gospel. It's the reason why you have that first part of the passage where they're arguing over the law, and then Jesus turns the tables and asks the Pharisees a question they dare not answer.

The reason why that exists is because Jesus is actually inviting them to interpret the scriptures, that line in it where it says, "The Lord said to my Lord sit at my right hand until I put your enemies under your feet," it's right from the Psalms. But the Pharisees could not follow that lens, that strategy of reading because it meant that they had to see the life they were living completely differently. Because for the Pharisees, there were great patriarchs like Moses and all the rest that followed him, which showed a long trajectory of decline.

Do you know what that's like? When we talk about the booths, for example, our forefathers, the people who did better than we did, all that we can think of is all of us have never quite followed in the footsteps of these giants. It's a pretty human thing to do. But Jesus wants them to see that to follow agape is to bank on the future. Because in that future, there is resurrection. And in that future, there is renewal. And in that future, there is hope. And in that future, there is faith. And in that future, there is love at a level that we cannot even understand such that we cannot ask or imagine.

So, today's gospel invites us into a strategy for living according to agape. And that means banking on the future, saying that this difficulty that we're experiencing today, when everything seems to be falling to pieces, all of it is just a step in the way to resurrection. And that will come. And the trick in life is that you have to be mindful of that present and past in your life that you carry in you like a memory, as you lean into that strategy of love. Because oftentimes we know the power of love only in retrospect, only as a memory of the scent of pipe smoke and the scribble of red ink on my pages. I wish, I wish I had saved one of those pages because I would treasure it today. But I was so focused on finishing. But now I know what I only perceived dimly at the time. Now I know, as Paul says, I see face to face.

A poem that I'm giving to you today to think about to maybe help bring this all home is from Robert Hayden. Robert Hayden was African American, born in Detroit, one of the more brilliant poets that the American Letters has ever produced. And this is *Those Winter Sundays*. And what's powerful about this poem is, to set the stage behind it, it's a father who works in menial labor, who is getting his son prepared to go to church, which was the place of status and opportunity for him in his world. And he's taking time to make the fires, get the

house in order, shine his son's shoes, and in the midst of a pretty unhappy context in marriage, to somehow love his son into the future. And this is what Hayden writes:

Those Winter Sundays

Sundays too my father got up early
and put his clothes on in the blueblack cold,
then with cracked hands that ached
from labor in the weekday weather made
banked fires blaze. No one ever thanked him.

I'd wake and hear the cold splintering, breaking.
When the rooms were warm, he'd call,
and slowly I would rise and dress,
fearing the chronic angers of that house,

Speaking indifferently to him,
who had driven out the cold
and polished my good shoes as well.
What did I know, what did I know
of love's austere and lonely offices?

This is a poem that looks to the past but banks on the future. The father who loves his son into the future, the son who is calling us as Jesus to live into the future. This is what it means to not only employ a strategy for reading about the agape in the New Testament, but to enact a strategy for living. Everything depends on that. What will your answer be?

Amen.