

TRUE SACRIFICIAL LOVE (ἡ ἀγάπη) IS FOUND ONLY IN JESUS

Hear the Word of God for this Quinquagesima Sunday, 50 days before the Resurrection of our Lord is celebrated as Easter, as the Holy Spirit sets the theme for the last three days before Ash Wednesday:

*Yet now remains faith, hope, sacrificial love, these three; and (the) greatest of these (is) sacrificial love.*¹

Grace be unto you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ

The last time today's Epistle reading served as the basis for the sermon text on this particular Sunday in this specific place, it was another SuperBowl Sunday! As the calendar moves, that was bound to happen, though it has taken eight years to get to this text again. Now, do not worry, we won't be hearing a repeat of the sermon from 2008! That day, we celebrated a baptism along with Confession and Absolution and the Lord's Supper. Today, baptism was remembered in the Invocation and returned to in Holy Absolution.

All of that leads us to the sacrificial love of God in Christ Jesus. That is true whether today's text was proclaimed in 2008, or 1991 (during Desert storm), or in 1978, on a later day of the year, at the marriage feast of Marty and me (I hand wrote a copy and posted it in the hallway of our first house. I thought it was a romantic text then, and know it is really all about Jesus now. Even so, I am still learning what today's text means). Five centuries ago today's texts was proclaimed during the years leading up to and into the the Reformation. The "Love Chapter" of First Corinthians has been read into the ears of the faithful for many centuries on this particular year. That remains true among us, whether it might fall upon a less auspicious day in our calendars than SuperBowl Sunday, or it is proclaimed on or near St. Valentine's Day. It all ends with this summary of the Word for the three days that precede the removal of the Alleluias and Glorias as we are prepared for fasting in joy:

Yet now remains faith, hope, sacrificial love, these three; and (the) greatest of

¹ I Corinthians 13:12-13.

these (is) sacrificial love. ²

Today, the sermon has begun, again, with the ending of the text for the day. That is because those words serve as a summary of all that comes before them. It directs the hearer – you – to the one gift of God that endures beyond all time. That is summed up in a word Christians like to bandy about, ἡ ἀγάπη, (the agape). If an English-speaking believer knows no other Biblical Greek word than Alleluia, it is likely to be agape.

Some will approach agape with romantic notions. In doing so, they will be in the camp of the Old Covenant Jews. Then, the word, as it is used about 19 times in the texts, “agape” referred to sensual love. Yet, when the Agape of God appeared in our flesh, for our salvation, the word took on new and far deeper meaning. Today, that is made clear in the declaration that when all of this fallen creation has passed away, the greatest remains – sacrificial love. Jesus Himself makes that clear when He declares to His followers:

*Behold, we are going up into Jerusalem, and will be completed all the things having been written through the prophets about the Son of Man. For He will be handed over to the nations; and He will be mocked; and He will be hated; and He will be spit upon; and scourging Him, they will kill Him. But, by the third day He will resurrect.*³

That dear ones in Christ, is the Good News of God for all sinners. The eternal truth is declared in the proclamation of the enduring love of God in sending His Son to die for you, and for all humans for all time. That message of salvation is what is declared to lead us in the Faith to Confession and Absolution. As forgiven sinners, we are led to love our neighbor as ourselves, and thus to produce that which endures for all time.

The Agape of God, sacrificial, unconditional love for all sinners, is what moves Christians beyond faith and hope. Those two, while great gifts, endure only for this life. Faith, genuine faith, *fears, loves and trusts in God above all things*. Faith is the the tangible element of things that are hoped for, the true evidence of unseen things.⁴ Thus, as first

² *I Corinthians* 13:12-13.

³ *Luke* 18:32-33.

⁴ *Hebrews* 11:1, paraphrase.

Table realities, *faith and hope only deal with God, while love has infinite external duties to man.*⁵

That means that true love is a second Table reality.

True love, that which goes beyond self to look to the interests of others, is that which bears the most fruits in this life – blessings which carry on into eternity. Faith endures by the gift of the Holy Spirit, until it finds its consummation in heaven. Hope remains in the believer through the Word, in trusting that God will give good things as yet unseen, in eternity. Love, though, God’s agape borne through the hopeful faithful in this life bears Christ to others.

St. Paul describes ἡ ἀγάπη with both positives and negatives. In one long sentence – at least to our “sound bite-accustomed” ears – the Spirit declares God’s gift of love.

Allow yourself to let these words sink in for all their meaning, as we learn anew what God, not man, declares true love to be:

*The sacrificial love (is) long-suffering, gracious; the sacrificial love (is) not jealous, [the sacrificial love] (does) not brag, (it is) not puffed up, it (does) not behave indecently, it (does) not seek the things of itself, (it is) not provoked to wrath, (it does) not account the evil, it rejoices not upon the unrighteous; but it rejoices with the truth; all things covers over, all things believes, all things hopes, all things endures.*⁶

That run-on sentence begins by describing agape love as long-suffering. It ends saying agape love endures. The words translated “long-suffering” and “enduring” declare God’s love for His people. When we contemplate the records of God’s patience in dealing with His people – from our first parents Adam and Eve – to the Church of our day in confessions which have renounced godly love by affirming abominations of that love, we can be overwhelmed by God’s graciousness and kindness.

For, if the Church were to have ever received what she truly deserves from God’s eternal justice, she would have been destroyed at Adam’s Fall in the Garden of Eden. Again, when Cain killed his brother Able, had God’s justice not been tempered by His long-suffering enduring in kindness for sinners, the Church would have been destroyed. Throughout the ages, God’s people sinned against Him – repeatedly despising that

⁵ *Book of Concord*, Tappert, et al, Philadelphia: Augsburg Press, 1959.

which you have come to know as the First and Second Tables of the Law.

Even so, God, Who is rich in grace and mercy, spared a remnant in each generation. Thank God that His greatest revealed attributes are summed up in the two positive descriptions of His Love declared today. They are: *long-suffering*, and *graciousness* (or kindness).

Such are the attributes that those who are one with God are free to emulate. In fact, to help us turn from our sins, God through St. Paul, goes on to describe just what you Christians are freed in Christ to do toward one another first, and all people as you are given opportunity. The Word calls you to be *not jealous* or, to not envy others for their blessings on earth and in the Faith. How is that going for you?

The Lord calls you to not brag of your faith and hope. Yet, are there not times when you thank God you are not like other people – unrepentant sinners who are given over to the ways of the world?

True love encourages you to not brag or be puffed up about the gift of the Faith, and the hope you have. But, are there times when you have gloried before others of the gifts you have in the Faith? Have you fallen to the temptation to think that you are doing good for God so that He will continue to do good for you?

God's love is given to turn you from indecent behavior. Yet, the Sixth Commandment, with the whole second Table, stands to convict you of lust, of coveting, of not putting the best construction on your neighbor's behavior and the like.

The Word today calls you away from self-serving thoughts, words, and deeds. Yet, have you not at times desired and sought after that which will improve your life, while not looking first to the interests of your brothers and sisters in Christ?

This is a lot of Law, I know, but we, in our sinful natures, need it. We need to see ourselves as those who are *provoked to wrath*, over injustices committed against us. We are to be reminded that we do *account the evil* others perpetrate against us, that we nurse our feelings when our pride is damaged. We deserve to be called to account for rejoicing *upon*

⁶ 1 Corinthians 13: 4-7.

the unrighteous... those who “get away” with going against God’s Word. Maybe you have fallen into the sin of believing that living together as married without benefit of God’s blessing, or perverting marriage for the benefit of humanly defined love.

When any of those “nots” of today’s text tie you up in sin, return to the long-suffering and kind God. Hear and believe that He rejoices with the Truth. In fact, He is the Truth incarnate. His truth is to bear your sins against divine love for one another into death and the grave. Look to the cross, behold the image of the Love of God Whose blood atones – covers over – all your sins. Believe that He has borne all your sins against Him – and that which you may behold each day – against your neighbor, into death and the grave.

Then, in sure and certain hope, look to the Author of your salvation. You are free to call upon Him when your sins weigh you down. You are blessed that He has endured all the punishment your sins deserve. Know that, when you have difficulty with the conviction and forgiveness God gives, that God inspired St. Paul to write these words for you:

For we continue to see now through (a) mirror in enigma, but then, face-to-face. Now I continue to know in part, but then I will intimately know, even as I was being intimately known. Yet now remains faith, hope, sacrificial love, these three; and (the) greatest of these (is) sacrificial love. ⁷

God knows our fallen natures prevent us from beholding His truths perfectly. Even the death of Jesus in our sins seems to us at times as too great a price to pay. Take heart, as you continue to confess your sins and receive God’s forgiveness, you are being preserved for the unending eternity that goes beyond time. That is when all the sacrificial love of God will be made clear to you. That will be when you behold the enduring fruits of the love you shared in this life for your neighbor. Remember, God has brought each and every one of you into this congregation at the right time that you might learn to and rejoice in serving one another. Such is not a superficial fellowship, but flows from repeated true, genuine partaking and sharing of His gifts at His Table and from their into

daily life.

The peace which passes all understanding guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus

Quinquagesima (*LSB* One-year series)

Isaiah 35:3-7; I Corinthians 13:1-13; Luke 18:31-43

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Soli Deo Gloria

⁷ I Corinthians 13:12-13.