THE FRUIT OF THE SPIRIT IS LOVE

Galatians 5:22-23

John 13:1-17, 31b-35

I have a confession a confession to make. I am one of those persons who craves having a cup of coffee in the morning. I can drink a whole pot before noon if I’m not careful. I prefer decaf but can tolerate regular coffee occasionally until the caffeine starts to make my heart flutter in pronounced ways until it feels like it will leap out of my chest.

My preference is to have the coffee with cream and a sweetener of some sorts—Splenda or Truvia seems to satisfy my desire for something sweet without adding to my blood sugar. I like my coffee hot, but if it is a warm sunny day, an iced coffee will be a welcomed treat.

My daughter Catie has convinced me to become a little more adventurous in my choices of coffee selections. And so, an old guy like me is discovering a new world of coffee culture with Starbucks and Scooters enticing me with a whole new “coffee language.” Do you want a cappuccino, an espresso, a skinny latte, or maybe an iced caramel macchiato? A cheap guy like me, has discovered I can get a McDonald’s Café sugar-free vanilla latte for less than two dollars!

What an incredible new language for coffee I’m learning. Different types of coffees with different names: cappuccino, espresso, latte, macchiato—it sounds like poetry to my ears! Coffee has become a sophisticated vocabulary!

The ancient Greeks were just as sophisticated in their vocabulary when they talked about love, recognizing different varieties of love as reflected in culture. Some of these Greek words for love include *eros (*pronounced AIR-ohs), *philia* (pronounced FILL-ee-uh)*, storge* (pronounced STOR-jay)*, and agape* (pronounced Uh-GAH-pay).

*Eros* is sexual love, romantic love, passionate love, physical and sensual love.  The term originated from the mythological Greek god Eros, who was considered the god of love, sexual desire, physical attraction, and physical love. The Roman counterpart of Eros was Cupid.

*Philia* is the close friendship one has for another, maybe the friendship between two friends. In ancient Greece, *philia* concerned the deep comradery that developed between brothers in arms who had fought side by side on the battlefield. It was about showing loyalty to your friends, sacrificing for them, as well as sharing your emotions with them.

*Storge* is the love of family relationships, the love of parent for child and the love of child for parent. *Storge* describes the type of deep and caring bond that develops naturally between parents and children, husbands and wives, siblings, as well as other people who you consider to be family. This type of love can withstand many trials, is protective, and extremely loyal.

A fourth kind of love, that is greater than any other love is *agape*.  It is committed, unconditional love that seeks only the best in others. This term defines the divine love that comes from God for humankind. Agape love is perfect, unconditional, and sacrificial. Indeed, Jesus Christ demonstrated this kind of divine love to all humanity in the way he lived and died for us.

It is interesting, if you search the works of literature, philosophy, and history of ancient Greece, you will find that *eros, philia,*and *storge* are used rather frequently.  But *agape* rarely appears in the secular writings of the Greek people.

On the other hand, in the religious writings of the New Testament, *agape* appears often. This love is a distinctive feature of the Christian faith.  We understand that *agape* is the kind of love that God has for us. The beloved passage from John speaks of this love in this way: “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life” (John 3:16).

Now when we consider the Fruit of the Spirit, as presented to us by the Apostle Paul in the passage from Galatians 5:22-23, this *agape* love, different from the three others, is the first component Paul includes in his list of fruit that is inspired by the Holy Spirit and is active in and among the Christ’s people.

It is important to remember Paul’s emphasis on the Fruit of the Spirit, is in response to what is happening in the church at Galatia. Paul says the Galatians are turning “to a different gospel” because of the influence of people who are proclaiming a different message about Christ than the message that Paul had proclaimed to them. These folks, who were stirring up trouble, suggested you must do something—get circumcised, keep laws, observe customs and rituals—and then you are really saved in a way you would not be if you simply trusted in God’s work alone. So Paul has been emphasizing it’s not about you and all the work you do. It is about God and what God has done for us in Jesus Christ.

Having said that, Paul takes a decisive turn in Galatians 5, and tells the Galatians that God has set us free in Christ, not to do whatever feels good, or whatever we want. No, freedom is to be in service to others and in service to God, and above all that means there is a whole lot of things we don’t do as baptized followers of Christ. He spells out things called the “work of the flesh” that have no place in the Christian faith. You can find these in Galatians 5:19-20.

We tend to think of “desires of the flesh” in terms of indulging bodily desires and certainly some of the works of the flesh that Paul lists fit this category. But many of the “works of the flesh” are more about matters of the heart, mind, and speech as these affect our relationship with God and one another. Eight of them have to do with divisiveness within the community: enmities, strife, jealousy, anger, quarrels, dissentions, factions, and envy can be very destructive to a community.

By contrast, the “fruit of the Spirit” is love with all the qualities that flow from it: “joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. There is no law against such things’ (Galatians 5:22-23).

Love—*agape* love—is listed *first* by Paul because it sets the tone for all that occurs in the community’s life together. Without love there would be no other fruit of the Spirit. Without love, there could be no joy, peace, patience kindness, generosity, gentleness, and self-control.” All the fruit of the Spirit flow out of this first fruit of the Spirit, which is love—*agape* love—the sacrificial giving of oneself to another.

This language of love, sacrificial *agape* love, is a huge part of Jesus’ teaching. It is evident in words and actions throughout his entire ministry. I am thinking especially of today’s gospel. In this last meal with his disciples, Jesus prepares his disciples for what lies ahead after the cross. He gives them a new commandment, telling them to serve others and to love one another as he has loved them. In demonstrating the importance of this love, Jesus takes up a towel, humbles himself and washes their feet, a task typically done by a servant. He says, “By this, everyone will know that you are my disciples: if you have love for one another.”

Jesus emphasizes that such love will be the identifying mark of fellowship with him. When everything seemed so uncertain, love will draw them together and help define their mission. It is a love that is not some sentimental emotion, but about doing. It is about a love that becomes incarnate in action.

It is unfortunate that many of us believe love is simply something you feel. There is this notion that love is the warm feeling one gets in church when something is said that touches your heart. Or when children are up front at worship responding enthusiastically to the pastor’s message for kids, we feel the touching emotions of that experience. Such moments may be the seeds of love, but it is not *agape* love until it gets beyond feeling to an action.

Jesus calls us to love one another as he has loved. That love was incarnational. It was love in action, in ministry, in the way he lived his life and in the way he died. This is not an easy thing that we are called to do. It will require that we struggle to love the stranger, the enemy, even those who have hurt us or betrayed us. For it is precisely this kind of person that Jesus loved when he loved his disciples, and it is this kind of person Jesus loves when he loves you and me.

We respond to such love by loving others. It is an essential fruit of the Spirit in our life that recognizes this gift as a mark of discipleship. As a disciple, we love—it defines who we are as a follower of Jesus Christ. We love because God first loved us. We love in gratitude and thanksgiving for the amazing love we received from God in Jesus Christ. We love as a responsible witness to our faith.

But on another level, Paul is concerned about how *agape* love is manifested in community. And here is here we can examine our own congregation and consider how this fruit gives identity to who we are and our mission together. How is *agape* love demonstrated in the way we treat one another—with patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, and self-control? How does the language of *agape* love get translated in ministry, so we are not focused on ourselves but turned outwardly to serve neighbor in a meaningful way? And finally, is all that we do, inspired by *agape* love, lived out and celebrated with joy? For discipleship is not drudgery but inspired by the spirit, is captured by a sense of gratitude and joy.

Sometimes the first steps of *agape* love will begin with a cup of coffee. By that, I mean the openness to engage in conversation with others in the community to discover how we can treat one another with love. But it also means thinking creatively about mission. Maybe in our conversation together, around the table, enjoying a cup of coffee, er can envision how we reach out to our neighbor with the language of love, *agape* love, a love that expresses a responsible witness of the faith we share. Amen.

**Galatians 5:22-23**

22The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness. 23gentleness, and self-control. There is no law against such things.

**John 13:1-17, 31b-35**

1Now before the festival of the Passover, Jesus knew that his hour had come to depart from this world and go to the Father. Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end. 2The devil had already put it into the heart of Judas son of Simon Iscariot to betray him. And during supper 3Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into his hands, and that he had come from God and was going to God, 4got up from the table, took off his outer robe, and tied a towel around himself. 5Then he poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples' feet and to wipe them with the towel that was tied around him. 6He came to Simon Peter, who said to him, "Lord, are you going to wash my feet?" 7Jesus answered, "You do not know now what I am doing, but later you will understand." 8Peter said to him, "You will never wash my feet." Jesus answered, "Unless I wash you, you have no share with me." 9Simon Peter said to him, "Lord, not my feet only but also my hands and my head!" 10Jesus said to him, "One who has bathed does not need to wash, except for the feet, but is entirely clean. And you are clean, though not all of you." 11For he knew who was to betray him; for this reason he said, "Not all of you are clean."

12After he had washed their feet, had put on his robe, and had returned to the table, he said to them, "Do you know what I have done to you? 13You call me Teacher and Lord — and you are right, for that is what I am. 14So if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. 15For I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you. 16Very truly, I tell you, servants are not greater than their master, nor are messengers greater than the one who sent them. 17If you know these things, you are blessed if you do them. 31When he had gone out, Jesus said, "Now the Son of Man has been glorified, and God has been glorified in him. 32If God has been glorified in him, God will also glorify him in himself and will glorify him at once. 33Little children, I am with you only a little longer. You will look for me; and as I said to the Jews so now I say to you, 'Where I am going, you cannot come.' 34I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. 35By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another."