

Fruit of the Spirit – Love

Just how far does Jesus' command to love extend?

We all know the two great commandments Jesus gave – love God, and love your neighbor as yourself. So, the command to love goes from God to self to neighbor.

But Jesus doesn't stop there. In case there's any gaps in the command to love, going from neighbor to enemy pretty much closes the gaps. That does not leave much wiggle room. Let me correct that. It doesn't leave any wiggle room.

Dang.

Because, you see, there are those times and those people that make loving hard.

There are people we love pretty easily, most of the time. We fall in love with a romantic partner, and we hope that love will be forever.

We fall in love with our children. We love our family...most of us most of the time. We have friends we love.

And there are times when we are feeling very upbeat and we look at everyone with a sense of love.

Then there are times when everyone is on our last nerve. We're frustrated and grumpy about everything in life. And we don't feel very loving at all. Towards anyone.

And there are some people we find downright impossible to love.

Sometimes people we loved turn out to be someone other than who we thought.

And then there's people who have done downright awful things. Or who harbor hateful, hurtful stances against a particular group.

We've all had someone who has hurt at least our feelings. And some people have had to deal with downright terrible abuse from someone. How can you love any of them? And what does love even mean in those situations?

There is a specific kind of love to which we are called that is more about actions than feelings. There are multiple Greek words translated as love. One is eros which is that feeling of being in love. There's philia, which is friendship and storge is a word for familial love.

The one we're talking about is agape. It reflects the kind of love God has for us. And it's the kind of love we're called to...a self-giving and sometimes even self-sacrificing love. It's a love that asks us to give up something.

Ultimately all the different categories of love will come down to agape. As anyone who has been in a long-term committed relationship knows, what starts with eros is eventually also going to take some agape.

Agape love is what characterizes the kingdom of God. Agape love is when anger and hate are turned to reconciliation instead of retaliation.

That's a hard kind of love. But in the end, that is the love that will defeat the dragon we met earlier this summer.

It's the kind of love that is definitely not about feelings.

On the global stage, we get occasional glimpses of that in places like Rwanda after the genocide. There, a formal peace and reconciliation process brought a significant measure of healing. South Africa also went through such a process after apartheid. That process offers us some ideas on how to work reconciliation at our own personal level.

First, it's not about sweeping awful things under a rug. The hurt has to be named...the truth told. In Rwanda, face to face, Tutsi people met with the person who killed their family and told their story.

In the case of Rwanda, there were jail sentences to be served, although they were shortened considerably if the perpetrator agreed to the process.

And together a way forward was forged that ended the violence and hate. Neighbors who were enemies could live in peace again. That's agape love.

OK, the Rwandan genocide is an extreme. But the point is, agape love applies to the most difficult circumstances and people we can possibly face.

Loving doesn't mean letting someone continue to hurt you. It doesn't mean someone who committed a crime gets off the hook. It doesn't always mean a relationship will be restored.

But it does mean retaliation has to stop. It does mean some form of restoration of the person who committed even the worst act has to be a goal.

Because that's the goal of the kingdom of God. Restoration. As with everything, we don't live completely in the kingdom of God. Complete healing and restoration can only be accomplished by God.

But God is working that kind of love, through us, even now. And God would be happy to do it even more.

People have worked through a healing and reconciliation process in some pretty awful situations. In confirmation one year I used a video clip of a woman who worked such a process with the person who murdered her child.

But agape love also happens in small very ordinary ways. Before I went to seminary, I sang in the choir at my home church. We always had an end of the year party to which families were invited.

At one of those gatherings, I remember this older woman from the choir in a conversation with our then probably 7-year old son.

He was telling a story about I think Harry Potter. 7-year olds are master story-tellers and can really get into the details of the story. She listened, asked questions, and was completely engaged in what turned out to be a very long story.

She may not have cared one whit about Harry Potter, but for that time love looked like listening to what made a 7-year old's heart sing. Sometimes agape love is as simple as that.

Agape love is not easy. When we are struggling to love, when we wonder if Jesus really meant this about loving enemies, we can soak in this reading from John's first letter. There was no limit to the agape love Christ has for us, an agape willing to give up his own life.

And Jesus did love his enemies, even while they watched him die on a cross. Soaking in that love is the beginning of truly understanding love. It's the beginning of our own healing and reconciliation. It's the source from which we draw to love others.

So, I said these sermons would not just be about you should but also about how you have borne the fruit of the Spirit. I want us to be aware that even now, in our own albeit imperfect ways, we do bear the fruit of the Holy Spirit working through us.

Nobody sent me any photos or stories showing love – anyone have one they want to share?

OK, let's reflect on this idea of love, especially agape love through a series of questions and maybe you'll discover you really have borne this fruit of love. You won't have to raise your hand or speak, just use this time to reflect on the work of the Spirit through you.

Have you ever listened patiently to an elderly person tell the same stories, over and over?

Have you ever been kind, even when you're in a grumpy mood?

Have you ever spoken up when someone was being a bully or saying hateful things about others?

Have you ever forgiven someone?

Have you ever set your own ego aside to let someone else have credit for something?

Have you ever let someone get in front of you in heavy traffic?

Have you ever forgiven a debt someone owed you?

Have you ever listened to someone you disagree with in order to understand rather than respond?

Have you ever had a hard conversation with someone with whom you are in conflict in order to begin the process of reconciliation?

Have you ever been completely engaged in a conversation with a child?

Have you ever stopped to help someone who was struggling to carry an armful of stuff or held a door open for someone?

Have you ever helped someone with rent or groceries when they've come up short?

My guess is you've all been able to remember at least a few times you've shown love. And just as important, you can probably also remember times when you've been a recipient of that kind of love.

We may not always see the significance of the little things. But even the smallest acts of agape love become building blocks for the kingdom of God.

And it all starts with Christ's love for us...it starts with a God who doesn't just love but who actually *is* love.