



SAINT THOMAS CHURCH FIFTH AVENUE
in the City of New York
The Reverend Canon Carl F. Turner, Rector
www.SaintThomasChurch.org

May 9, 2021
The Sixth Sunday of Easter

Festal Eucharist
11am

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A Sermon by
The Reverend Canon Carl F. Turner, *Rector*

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‘The Power of Love’

“At home in South Africa I have sometimes said in big meetings where you have black and white together: “Raise your hands!” Then I have said, “Move your hands,” and I’ve said “Look at your hands - different colors representing different people. You are the Rainbow People of God.” ¹ Words of Archbishop Desmond Tutu, the first Black South African Archbishop of Cape Town, and one who resisted the evils of racism that was institutionalised in South Africa through apartheid from 1948 until it was dismantled in the early 1990s beginning with the release of Nelson Mandela.

South Africa could easily have fallen apart in the 1990s and there could have been much bloodshed; those who had been treated so shamefully over many years might so easily have sought revenge. But Tutu brought the Gospel of love to bear on what was an explosive situation and, instead, shocked some in the world by putting into action change through non-violence by his truth and reconciliation process. He embodied the kind of love that Jesus demonstrated in his life on earth; radical love – powerful love – the kind of love that is at odds with the world and the way that powerful men in our world still try to fix things to their own ends. What he did was to put into practice the words of Jesus that we heard today in our Gospel reading: *“This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you.”* It was, and still remains, the first principle by which Tutu lives his Christian life. As he, himself, has said, *“There are different kinds of justice. Retributive justice is largely Western. The African understanding is far more restorative - not so much to punish as to redress or restore a balance that has been knocked askew.”* ²

My friends, dare I say it, this is deeper even than the phrase “Black lives matter” because it is not enough to say that – or even to put it into practice – it is to experience what Jesus means by *his* kind of love. Otherwise *Black Lives Matter* simply remains a slogan.

Now, as is sometimes the case, the English language is a poor relation to New Testament Greek. In English we have one word for love that is used to describe everything from loving your favorite soap opera to loving your mother to loving your pet dog to erotic love that happens behind closed doors. In Greek, however, there are four different words that each can be translated as the English word ‘love,’ but each means something quite different. There is a word for familial love – the love that a parent has for a child or family members have to one another - *storge* ³. It is very particular. Then there is a word that means emotional love such as a deep friendship or expressed in compassion for those in need – *philia* ⁴. That word is used to describe the fellowship enjoyed between members of the Church in the Letters of Paul. The Greek word for erotic love *eros* ⁵. you will probably be familiar with because of the statue to the god of love in Piccadilly Circus in London. Eros is not found in the New Testament, though it *is* found in the Greek translation of the Songs of Songs in the Old Testament. But the fourth word for love in the New Testament is the most

important of all – *agape* ⁶. This kind of love is unconditional love, pure love, and sacrificial. This is the word that Jesus uses to describe the Father’s love for the world and the word he uses when he gives his ‘new commandment.’

Because of these different words for love, we can work out what Jesus is saying to us today, but we can also work out what he is *not* saying today. The love that Jesus is commanding us to participate in is nothing short of that sacrificial love that he demonstrated on the Cross by forgiving those who put him there. We are called to abide in that kind of love – God’s love – not human love or even brotherly or familial love. Even when Jesus describes our relationship with him as ‘friends’ rather than ‘servants,’ the word he uses is related to one of the Greek words for love, which can be better translated as ‘beloved’ for we are to be a people radically transformed through love that will change us, challenge us, and transform us. If we allow the kind of love that Jesus talks about to inhabit us, we become *beloved*, and how significant it is in St. John’s Gospel that is the *Beloved Disciple* who leans on the Lord’s breast at the Last Supper, and stands at the foot of the Cross.

And remember, Jesus said that we are to abide or *remain* in his love – this agape-love is not something we should try to do every now and again; it is to be the character of our Christian vocation to be people of love – unconditional, sacrificial, Jesus-centered love. That is the kind of love that can change the world – it is not shallow or self-centered but powerful because it originates in God. As we have been hearing in our Epistle readings during Eastertide from the first letter of John – “*God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them.*” (1 John 3:16). Have you noticed how many times John speaks about this new commandment of love? Some have said that the Gospel and Letters are simply about that – the difference between God’s love and human love. But we are also called to practice that love of God: “*Little children, let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action.*”

“Raise your hands! ...Move your hands! ...Look at your hands - different colors representing different people. You are the Rainbow People of God.”

What does this mean for us? Let us look at our first reading from the Acts of the Apostles. First, we need to set the context because it is crucial to our understanding of this passage – one of the most important passages in the Book of Acts because it changed the course of Church history.

Peter is in Caesarea – a city that Herod the Great built on the coast to honor the Roman Emperor, hence its name. So, the name itself is significant. Peter is in the house of Cornelius – a Roman centurion – with his friends and family. Cornelius is one of those fair-minded and kind, charitable officers of the Roman Empire who is impartial and, therefore, well-liked by Jews as well as Gentiles. Nevertheless, he is a Gentile, an official of the Roman Empire, living in a city that is dedicated to the Roman Emperor – for a Jew, you can’t get much more gentile than that! With that context we now need to know why Peter is there.

Cornelius has had a vision; an angel appeared to him and asked him to send for the Apostle Peter, so he sends one of his trusted soldiers with two slaves to find Peter. Meanwhile, Peter is in Joppa, where he has just raised Dorcas from the dead. While the messengers are on their way, Peter also has a vision that is as strange as it is powerful. Peter sees a huge sheet being lowered from heaven and in it all kinds of animals and birds – clean *and*, significantly, unclean according to Jewish Law. A voice says to Peter, “*Get us, Peter; kill and eat.*” But Peter remonstrates with God, telling him that he has been a faithful Jew and never eaten anything unclean, to which the voice from heaven says, “*What God has made clean, you must not call profane.*” Three times this happens. The number three is, of course, a pattern for Peter – three denials – three restorations – now three statements about what is clean and unclean. At that moment, Cornelius’ messengers arrive. Ordinarily, Peter would have refused to go to Caesarea with them, but we are told the Holy Spirit prompted Peter to go with them. On entering Cornelius’ house, Peter preaches a sermon – just like the one he preached on the Day of Pentecost (we heard part of on Easter Day) and that takes us to today’s reading from Acts. While Peter is still speaking, the Holy Spirit descends on Cornelius and his friends and family,

just as had happened on the Day of Pentecost to Peter and the other Apostles. Now, this is extraordinary not simply because these people are Gentiles, but they are not even baptized! God cannot be confined within human reasoning or even Holy Scripture – God’s Holy Spirit transforms and renews the face of the earth, including the perceptions and the prejudices of our own hearts and minds. What happened next changed the Church forever. Peter, witnessed by his Jewish companions who are followers of Jesus Christ, baptized Cornelius and his whole household. This was unprecedented, so much so, that it almost caused division in the infant Church and led to the first Council of the Church in Jerusalem which was also attended by Paul and Barnabas. What happened in Caesarea is significant; it involved the Holy Spirit and the Prince of the Apostles – Peter; some say that it is a second Pentecost only, this time, for Gentiles.

“What does this mean?” says N.T. Wright. *“It means that there is now a community which is living as a highly unlikely, unpredictable family – a community that is sharing common life as family across traditional boundaries; Jews and Gentiles living together.”*⁷ In other words, it was shocking; it was counter-cultural; it was life-changing and life-giving. It challenged all the stereotypes, rules, and principles that had been held for so long. A new People of God was born, because of Jesus’ commandment to love in the way that he loved. That agape ‘unconditional-sacrificial-God-centered love’ made it possible and changed the Church for ever.

But Agape love is difficult love. It means facing up to our past, making a difference to our present, and setting our face towards a different kind of future – which is at the heart of our Baptismal Covenant that we renewed at Easter. It is not about ‘playing nicely’ for it fundamentally changes things and it challenges things; Agape-love is hard because it is rooted in self-sacrifice and, ultimately, the sacrifice of Jesus on the Cross who stretches out his arms in an embrace to welcome all humanity.

Writing to the Galatians, Paul says *“There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.”* (Galatians 3:28) How hard the Church has had to struggle with this kind of radical God-centered love over the past 2000 years. Sometimes it is glaringly obvious, such as the treatment of indigenous peoples; involvement in slavery, or segregation, or apartheid based on a person’s race or color; but more concerning is the subtlety of institutional racism and the passing over of people from leadership roles in the church. The Church of England sent missionaries into many countries, but when people from the Empire, then later the Commonwealth, came back to England as loyal Anglicans with their King James Version Bibles and Hymns Ancient and Modern, they did not find the welcome they expected – and still, to this day, there are relatively few black British serving as priests, let alone canons, archdeacons, deans, or bishops.

But Paul’s letter to the Galatians is not simply about race; it is also about status, and gender. Agape-love also challenges the subtler aspects of discrimination and prejudice, including the things that we don’t like to talk about: issues of class, education achievement, gender, and human sexuality are all ways that agape love can be avoided in the church. Which means that facing up to this is uncomfortable for the Church. Agape love means facing up to realities rather than just being nice to one another – that’s not the kind of love that Jesus set us as an example.

Desmond Tutu once said, *“Forgiving and being reconciled to our enemies or our loved ones are not about pretending that things are other than they are. It is not about patting one another on the back and turning a blind eye to the wrong. True reconciliation exposes the unfulness, the abuse, the hurt, the truth. It could even sometimes make things worse. It is a risky undertaking but in the end it is worthwhile, because in the end only an honest confrontation with reality can bring real healing. Superficial reconciliation can bring only superficial healing.”*⁸

Jesus said to his disciples, and he says to you and to me here and now, *“If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father’s commandments and abide in his love.”*

And, my friends, although practicing agape-love is hard and challenging, it has an unexpected consequence; because Jesus wants us to abide in his kind of love, the result is one of the fruits of the Spirit - deep joy!

Jesus goes on to say, “*I have said these things to you so that **my joy** may be in you, and that **your joy may be complete.**”*

Let us pray.

Lord Jesus Christ, who didst stretch out thine arms of love on the hard wood of the cross that everyone might come within the reach of thy saving embrace: So clothe us in thy Spirit that we, reaching forth our hands in love, may bring those who do not know thee to the knowledge and love of thee; for the honor of thy Name. *Amen.*

- ¹. Desmond Tutu: Sermon in Tromsø, Norway (5 December 1991)
- ². Desmond Tutu: from “Recovering from Apartheid” - The New Yorker (18 November 1996)
- ³. στοργή - *storge* (*pron. stor-gay*)
- ⁴. φιλία – *philia* (*pron. fil-ee-ah*)
- ⁵. ἔρως – *eros* (*pron. eh-ros*)
- ⁶. ἀγάπη – *agape* (*pron. ag-ab-pay*)
- ⁷. N.T. Wright, from ‘N.T. Wright Online’ – *What does love mean?* 8/2/2019 [Link: WHAT DOES LOVE MEAN? - Biblical Study with Professor N. T. Wright - YouTube](#)
- ⁸. Desmond Tutu – article in ‘Greater Good Magazine’ September 1, 2004