

## **“No Greater Love: Loving the Stranger”**

**A sermon by Pastor Dan Harrison (4/15/18), Church of the Covenant**

Love is not always easily defined. It can be an elusive word. I think about how often we use the word. I love pizza, I love the fresh air, I love working in the yard, I love that author, I love you. The word love holds a full spectrum of meaning and emotional affection. It's a wide range, really. Even in the Hebrew, the word “ahab” has an equally wide range of connotations. So, the Hebrew scriptures are full of this word within a variety of contexts. However, in the Christian Scriptures, which are written in Greek, there are largely two words used for “love”: Philio (brotherly love)—easily remember by the city of Philadelphia, the city of “brotherly love”, and Agape (a deeper, self-sacrificing love) which is the love used most often to refer to God's love for us and our love for God, and how we ought to love one another. Now it would be misleading to say there wasn't a deeper term occasionally used in Hebrew scripture that carried with it a heavier burden of true, authentic care and affection: Khessed. This word was more often translated as “loving kindness”; it is the word used to describe the immense love and loyalty Ruth showed, for example, to Naomi her mother-in-law, when she said “your people shall be my people, and your land shall be my land” and she followed her in faith to Bethlehem. This level of “love” seems to correlate nicely to the Greek word “Agape”. This is the word that the Second Testament writers chose, as Jesus was likely using an Aramaic equivalent in his speech.

To more fully understand Agape, and its self-sacrificial nature, let us glean from the 20<sup>th</sup> Century Greek author Nikos Kazantzakis, who in his memoir, *A Report To Greco*, gives us a wonderful account of the spirit of Agape:

“I knew that no matter what door you knock on in a Cretan village, it will be opened for you. A meal will be served in your honor and you will sleep between the best sheets in the house. In Crete the stranger is still the unknown god. Before him all doors and all hearts are opened.

Night had already begun to descend as I entered the village. The doors were all shut; in the courtyard the dogs caught the intruder's scent and began to bark. Where should I go, at which door should I knock? At the priest's home, where all strangers find refuge. The priests in our village are uncultivated, their education meager; they are incapable of any theoretical discussion of Christian doctrine. But Christ lives in their hearts, and sometimes they see Him with their eyes, if not by the pillow of a wartime casualty, then sitting beneath a flowering almond tree in springtime.

A door opened. A little old woman came out with a lamp in her hand to see who the stranger was who had entered the village at such an hour. I stopped. “Long may you live, madam,” I said, sweetening my voice so that she would not be frightened. “I am a stranger and have nowhere to sleep. Would you be so kind as to direct me to the priest's house?”

“Gladly. I'll hold the lamp so you won't stumble. God-his holy name be blessed- gave soil to some, stones to others. Our lot was the stones. Watch your step and follow me.

She led the way with the lamp. We turned a corner and arrived at a vaulted doorway. A lantern was hanging outside.

“This is the priest's house,” said the old woman.

Lifting the lamp, she threw the light on my face and sighed. She was going to say something but changed her mind. "Thank you, my fine woman," I said. "Sorry to bother you. Good night." She kept looking at me, not going away.

If you wouldn't mind a poor house, you could come and lodge with me."

But I had already knocked on the priest's door. I heard heavy steps in the yard.

The door opened. Standing in front of me was an old man with a snow-white beard and long hair flowing down over his shoulders. Without asking me who I was or what I wanted, he extended his hand.

"Welcome. Are you a stranger? Come in."

I heard voices as I entered. Doors opened and closed, and several women slipped down hastily into the adjoining room and vanished. The priest had me sit down on the couch.

"My wife, the papadhiá, is a little disposed; you'll have to excuse her. But I myself will cook for you, lay the table for your supper, and prepared a bed so that you can sleep."

His voice was heavy and afflicted. I looked at him. He was extremely pale, and his eyes were swollen and inflamed, as though from weeping. But no thought of a misfortune occurred to me. I ate, slept, and in the morning the priest came and brought me a tray of bread, cheese, and milk. I held out my hand, thanked him, and said goodbye.

"God bless you, my son," he said. "Christ be with you."

I left. At the edge of the village an old man appeared. Placing his hand over his breast, he greeted me.

"Where did you spend the night, son?" he asked.

"At the priest's house."

The old man sighed. "Ah, the poor fellow. And you didn't catch wind of anything?"

"What was there to catch wind of?"

"His son died yesterday morning. His only son. Didn't you hear the women lamenting?"

"I heard nothing. Nothing."

"They had him in the inner room. They must have muffled their laments to keep you from hearing and being disturbed..."

Pleasant journey!"

"My eyes filled with tears.

“What are you crying for!” exclaimed the old man in astonishment. “Oh, I see: you’re young, you haven’t gotten used to death yet. Pleasant journey!”

Jesus said, “No greater love (or Agape) has a person than to lay their life down for others” (John 15:13). It is the pinnacle of love – self-sacrifice. Jesus reiterated this truth when he said the greatest command besides loving God, is to love (Agape) your neighbor as yourself (Mark 12:30-31). And finally Jesus said, “when I was a stranger, you welcomed me in” (Matt 25:35). And there in-lies the challenge. Jesus offered us a new paradigm through which to view others, and that was a lens which no longer saw people as “others” but see them as simply “ourselves”. Nicodemus, a religious leader, as we see in John 3, struggled to understand what a paradigm shift could look like for him. Jesus discussed with him that he needed to see through a new lens, one which would require him to dismiss much of his prejudices and deep-rooted finite, thinking. In fact, he told him, he would not even see the Kingdom of God without doing so. We know from scripture that Jesus taught us: The kingdom of God is here, within us. Within you and me, but we must seek it (as we talked about last week): We must “seek ye first the kingdom of God and his justice”, then the rest will come along with it. And to receive this new understanding that God loves (agape) us—so much that his story towards us is really an Agape love story.

Then there is the question, how can I love others if I can’t love myself? How can I welcome a stranger if I can’t welcome the familiar? Perhaps we are at a crossroads in our own personal journeys, where we must reflect on this very real truth: I must accept me. Though like the author Nikos showed us the incredible generosity and Agape of the people of Crete, we must find that same love and hospitality within ourselves. We must give ourselves space to process, to grieve, to laugh, to acknowledge, to accept. We must then turn this self-actualized state of being into action of Agape in relationship to those around us: to process with, to grieve with, to laugh with, to acknowledge and accept fully with—where then “others” become “ourselves”, and we become one in the same. To welcome the stranger, we in essence become the stranger.

Last week I had the good fortune of meeting a wonderful new friend named Dimitri. He is a “hobo artist”, who for more than twenty five years has chosen to live and travel on the streets as an artist, not claiming a home or possessions, in order to be a positive light, sharing in the journeys of others. He was fascinating to talk to as he stayed with us for a couple of days while finishing up on a canvas mural for “The Poor People’s Campaign” that was destined for DC. It was amazing how even when offered a train ticket to get him up North where he was heading next, he politely declined it, because he enjoyed walking and taking in nature, and most of all meeting people. In this way, I guess, the “stranger” becomes the “familiar”, his mineral becomes the “salt” of the earth, and his hue becomes “the light of the world”, while I thought for some reason that was solely my job. But no, that is OUR job. We each play a part.

The stranger. Thinking on this it reminded me of the story I heard of Gordon Cosby (our founder Bev’s older brother and mentor), where it was told that Gordon encountered a burglar stealing from his home once. Confronted with his hands full of Gordon and Mary’s things, Gordon invited the “stranger” to sit and talk with him for a bit, which the stranger did. By the end of the talk, the stranger was now no longer a stranger but a familiar, even joining with Gordon and Mary in their work at Church of the Saviour in the years that followed. This is extreme, but apropos to our mission of Agape: Love the stranger. Love the unknown among us. Love ALL as we love ourselves.