

**Holy Trinity Lutheran Church
Des Moines, WA
April 24, 2016**

John 13:31-35

Agape Defined

Hymns: 154 – 497 – 490 – Closing: 498

All Scripture quotations from NIV 1984

When he was gone, Jesus said, "Now is the Son of Man glorified and God is glorified in him. ³²If God is glorified in him, God will glorify the Son in himself, and will glorify him at once. ³³My children, I will be with you only a little longer. You will look for me, and just as I told the Jews, so I tell you now: Where I am going, you cannot come. ³⁴A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. ³⁵By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another." John 13:31-35

Smartphones. The Internet. Airplanes. What do those words have in common? They are words that in the not too distant past simply did not exist. Ten years ago, smartphone was a word that would've meant nothing to any of us. 25 years ago, it was the word internet. 115 years ago, airplane would be a word that would illicit blank stares of ignorance. It's rather amazing, isn't it, how new words pop out to describe new inventions and new concepts. In fact, each year, Oxford adds an average of 1,000 new words to their dictionary.

In the 1st century A.D., a new word burst onto the scene and made its meaning known throughout the world in a remarkable way. People were noticing this group called Christians act in a different way, both to one another and also to others, even their enemies. It was like nothing the world had ever seen, and for this new way of living, there was invented a new word – Agape. It is a Greek word that was non-

existent before the writing of the New Testament, but it came to describe a uniquely Christian concept. Two thousand years later, it remains a word that defines who we are and what we do.

To understand the deep impact of that important word, you have to go back to where it got its start. It was in an upper room, on a Thursday evening, in a world where agape was still an unknown. A man was sitting with 12 of his closest friends in what would be their Last Supper together, and this man named Jesus was speaking in a somewhat cryptic way; speaking about being glorified and then leaving. And he closed his words to his disciples with this: **"A new command I give you: Agape one another. As I have agaped you, so you must agape one another. By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you agape one another."** (John 10:34-35)

As those men sat there, they didn't know what that word meant. Jesus telling them to agape would've have been the equivalent of telling a person in the 1800's to fly a plane. It wouldn't have registered for those men what agape was, but it soon would.

Jesus was about to do something which the world had never seen. They were about to see what agape was as they watched Jesus go to the cross. And as he did, the disciples were learning what agape was all about. Agape love was suffering for sins that were not his; it was dying a brutal death that he did not deserve; it was feeling God's wrath even though he was a perfect Son. He would act in love that was unique, that was sacrificial, that was selfless. It was such remarkable work that a new word needed to be created to describe it because it was clear that this type of love was not naturally found amongst humans.

You see, we love, but it's much different than the love we see from Jesus. We love our spouses, our families, our friends, and we might even say that we do so naturally. But how do we love? Even with those who are close to us, we love selfishly, because it is good for us, it brings blessings into our lives; we love reciprocally, loving more or less depending upon how we are

being loved in that moment; we love imperfectly, often causing hurt to those we claim to love and being hurt by those who love us. And remember, that is with those who are close to us.

With strangers; with people who are different than us – we are naturally distant and cautious – and that is at our best. At our worst, we are full of fear and judgment that shows itself in prejudices. We are full of hatred and evil that shows itself in mistreatment.

And that is why this love that Jesus showed was something that needed a new word to describe it. Because He was doing those acts of love, not for those who were close to him, or for those who had done so much to make him love them. He was doing it for people who were constantly hurting him and his Father with their sinful thoughts, words and actions. He was doing it for people who were natural enemies of him and his Father. He was doing it for people who would reject him even as he hung on a cross for them. It was clear that this was love that was not naturally found among us. This love had to come from God.

It did so, first and foremost in his Son, Jesus Christ our Savior, in his life and his death; in his words and his actions, in everything that he did for us as our Savior.

But Jesus told his disciples that he didn't want this agape to just be seen in him. He wanted it also to be seen in the lives of his disciples; he wanted it to be seen in us; he wanted it to be seen in people for whom agape is not natural.

As Jesus stood in that upper room, telling his disciples to agape, he was not giving them an impossible command. He was giving them an unnatural command, but it would be a command that he would also equip them to follow.

Through the heart-turning and life-changing work of the Holy Spirit, God would make people who were previously incapable of agape into those whose lives would be defined by it. And that agape love, shown perfectly in Jesus, would make a profound impact in the church, but also in the world. Wherever the Word spread, Christians were known for the way in which they loved one another, and also for the way in which

they loved others, even those who were persecuting, imprisoning, and executing them. They loved selflessly, they loved sacrificially, they loved uniquely.

Have you ever had the opportunity to do something unique? I was trying to think about what that means to us anymore. In the history of the world, less than one percent of all people who have ever lived have driven in a car; flown in an airplane; travelled to a foreign country. Yet, those are things that we can do with relative ease. So, perhaps we live in a world where unique and special has lost a bit of its luster. What is unique for us?

Here is something: Agape. Agape will always be unique. Unique in the selfless, sacrificial way that it shows itself. Unique in the fact that it only comes from God. You have been the recipient of agape love in two amazing ways. You have been loved with agape by your Savior who lived perfectly and died sacrificially for you. You have been equipped with agape that you might show what it means to people who don't yet know.

It is only a heart that has been loved in such a way that can in turn take that love and give it to others. Each and every day, that means you have a unique opportunity. Take that agape that has been shown to you and give it to others – people like you who didn't earn this kind of love, people like you who don't deserve this kind of love, people like you who do, however, need this kind of love.

That means showing selfless, sacrificial love to those who are closest to you – to your spouse, to your family members, to your friends. Love them even when they aren't giving you love back – when they hurt you; when they disappoint you; when they sin against you. That is agape.

But the command goes beyond those people, doesn't it? Agape, also, those whom the Bible calls your brothers and sisters in Christ. The people who you gather with here in God's house are a gift from God that we too often don't see or treasure, let alone show agape to. So, show it first to them in small ways: taking note of those people we pray about in church, and adding them to your own prayer list even if you don't know who they are; tracking down that new face

and finding out who they are and what they are about, even if your first impression tells you that they are nothing like you; find your unique way to show agape love and you will likely also find a true brother or sister.

But the agape opportunity extends beyond these walls as well. Showing this unique love even to those in the world who seem like strangers or even enemies is what really set those early Christians apart. We live in a cynical, cold world and it is very easy to get trapped into that world ourselves. But every day, there are opportunities waiting for you beyond these walls. There are ways for you to show people something unique, something that because of Jesus you know all about.

Remember, agape was once something completely unknown to the world. In many ways, it is still unknown. Looking at your Savior, and listening to your Savior, define that word every day for the people in your world in the way that you live, in the way that you love, in the way that you agape. Amen.