

Synod Assembly Worship – May 2, 2021

GOSPEL READING: John 15:9-17

One: The holy gospel according to John, the fifteenth chapter.

All: Glory to you, O Lord.

As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love. 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. I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete. This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you. I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father. You did not choose me but I chose you. And I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last, so that the Father will give you whatever you ask him in my name. I am giving you these commands so that you may love one another.

One: The gospel of the Lord.

All: Praise to you, O Christ.

Dear siblings in Christ, grace, peace and mercy are yours through our risen Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen

We are just coming off of our synod-wide gathering...our second digital synod assembly in two years. We have gathered around the theme of "Love Ignites Us". This worship service is an extension of our synod assembly and I am glad that you can all be with us. You are connected to the 131 congregations that are a part of the Northeastern Minnesota Synod. Together, we are stronger than any of us are on our own – and we need each other as we continue to spread the love of God in Christ Jesus to a world that is hungry for a word of hope, forgiveness and love.

When we hear the word Love, I suspect that many of us have several different images swirling in our imaginations. How many of you have or have had a song that you or your spouse or partner have called "your" song? Maybe it's one that was playing when you first met. Maybe it's a song that was popular when you were dating. Maybe it's the song you danced to at your wedding or just a song that tells a familiar story or speaks a familiar word about your relationship.

Love songs are good. It means something to have 'a song' you can call your own. It means something to have '*your song*' – one that captures a moment in time or that helps to define a relationship or that simply triggers a meaningful memory. And that can be hard, too, of course, when a relationship ends, or memories fade.

And anyone who's ever been in a relationship of any kind for any length of time knows that a song – no matter how good – only goes so far. It's easy to be in love when the stars are shining or when the weather's nice or when the dishes are done; when the lawn's been mowed and the bills are paid.

And, while I think Jesus can appreciate this kind of romantic, sentimental love, it's important to know that this not what he has in mind when he speaks to the disciples in this morning's Gospel about abiding in the love of God.

Because, for starters, "abide" is a great word, isn't it? ... to remain in, to hold fast to, to endure... the notion of what it means to abide carries with it a lot of weight, don't you think? And so does the word Jesus uses for "love" this morning.

It's worth acknowledging or remembering that we can get pretty lazy with our words ... we say we love chocolate, or we love the races, or we love that outfit or that restaurant or that song, or whatever. And then we say that we love God, too, and that God calls us to love one another and to love our neighbor and to love our enemy, just the same...as if those kinds of *love* are all the same sort of thing.

So it matters that Jesus uses that word "agape" for the love he's talking about today... to describe a love, that isn't a romantic, sentimental, groovy-kind-of-love, if you will. Jesus isn't talking about the "love" of most love songs, here. Agape-love is the sort of love *God* has for us and for the world, whether we know it or believe it or even like it or not.

Jesus says, "I chose you" ... "you did not choose me, but I chose you." That agape kind of love is holy, it's sacred, it's unconditional. That agape kind of love is an all-encompassing, cosmic kind of love. And it's this kind of love in which we are invited to *abide*.

Abide in MY kind of love Jesus says... God's kind of love. And to do that, he says, takes some work, some discipline, some commandment-following, some patience. ...

Not only that... this kind of abiding, this kind of deep, divine, cosmic-sort-of-loving – the kind of love Jesus lived and died embodying was the GREATEST kind of love and it isn't easy. I don't think it was easy for Jesus every step of the way, and I know it's not easy for us, either.

It wasn't easy for Jesus because it was this kind of love that drove him to the cross. It was agape love that called him out of his humanity and it was agape that allowed him to be crucified, killed and raised for the sake of all creation. That's the kind of love God has for the world.

Agape-love doesn't have strings attached. Agape-love doesn't have pre-requisites. Agape-love doesn't have a check-list. It is without limits. It doesn't ask questions – it just is. It just – and utterly – loves. It's a hard thing to describe and it's a hard thing to define. It's one of those things that is so big, so deep, so wide you can't quite explain it – you just know it when you feel it or when you see it in action.

So, I wonder if we can think about a time in our lives when we've felt the most loved. Maybe it sounded sweet like a love song. Maybe it rhymed like a poem. And that's great. But maybe it didn't. Maybe it wasn't pretty, like forgiveness for something that didn't deserve to be overlooked; or a dream sacrificed so that another dream could come true. Maybe it was tired and worn out – like a night spent in worry or prayer on your behalf.

Maybe it was unsettling to know how far someone else was willing to go or how much someone else was willing to give for your happiness or comfort or peace of mind, when you didn't deserve it. That's the abiding kind of agape-love that drove Jesus to the cross.

Think about a time in your life when you had the most love to give. Did it sing like a song or feel like a dream? Did it hurt a little bit? Did it mean giving something up for somebody else? Did it mean sacrificing your own time, your own money, your own patience, or some part of your very self for the sake of another? That's the abiding kind of agape-love Jesus is talking about this morning, too.

It's not always pretty. It doesn't always end with a kiss or a dance or a warm embrace. And what's more, we aren't supposed to be picky about who receives it. This agape-kind-of-love comes for the sake of the world. It is for the outcast and the outsider – for those who don't look like us and for those for whom we may not even know – for those we may label as “undeserving” and for those we may judge and despise... that makes this love unsettling and scary and dangerous, too.

But the love of God in Christ Jesus urges us on...we're given the courage to love because Christ dwells within us. We become conduits...vessels of this love. **Love ignites us!** We can't help but share it – spread it - and give it away because the AGAPE of God is poured out for the world with grace and mercy and peace for ALL people – no exceptions.

It wouldn't mean as much if it were easy to give. We wouldn't know this love's worth or value if we never shared it with another. It's not something we can claim as ours alone. It's more than just a moment or a memory or a cheesy sentimentality.

Here is where you have been chosen, dear synod partners - called and appointed by virtue of your baptism in Jesus' name to point to and witness to Christ, and to proclaim the good news that God loves us – and that God will not shy away even from the worst of humanity's instincts – and the resurrection that follows is the promise and sign that when we've done our very worst, been our very worst, fallen so tragically short of God's hopes for us...yet even then God's love embodied and made flesh in Jesus endures, remains, and is victorious.

“You did not choose me,” Jesus reminds us, “but I chose you and I have forgiven you so that you are free to go forth and bear the good fruit that I have called and appointed you to bear—fruit that will not just be a band-aid solution to the woes of this world, as good as they may be, but fruit that also will have a long-lasting effect in bringing about the beloved community of justice, peace, and freedom for which I so ardently advocated until I took my last breath and gave my life over to the God whose Spirit guided me throughout my entire life in the way of truth.”

Oh, Love Ignites Us, people of God! The AGAPE of God – the kind of love Jesus chooses for us – and chooses us *for* – is something we can only abide and dare to offer when we acknowledge that it's already been poured out for **our** sake too.

I leave you with the scripture we have heard today and the Word which we have gathered around this weekend in our Synod Assembly. Hear these words as a commissioning – as a charge to action in Christ’s name as you are sent out into the weary world: From Second Timothy, chapter 1: *for God did not give us a spirit of cowardice, but rather a spirit of power and of love.*

And from Second Corinthians, chapter 5: *The love of Christ urges us on, because we are convinced that one has died for all; therefore all have died. And he died for all, so that those who live might live no longer for themselves, but for Christ who died and was raised for them...for us... for all the world.*

Love Ignites Us! Go and walk in this way of truth – the way of compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience grounded in God’s eternal love. Amen.