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**Easter 5 Year C 4-17-2016; John 13:31-35**  
**Saint Barnabas, Bainbridge Island, WA**  
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Today, although we are still in the Easter season and looking toward Pentecost in just a few weeks, this morning's lesson from John takes us back to the "last supper," just before the crucifixion. This may seem somewhat confusing or out of order from our perspective, but the author of John tends to collapse or blur the traditional sequence of the crucifixion, resurrection, ascension, and Pentecost that we tend to keep separate and distinct. Indeed, in this morning's lesson, again before the crucifixion, before the resurrection, and before the ascension, John tells us, "Now the Son of Man has been glorified." This is language that is usually reserved for the post-Easter, resurrected Christ.

In any case, John's intention in today's lesson is to show us how Jesus is trying to prepare his disciples for his departure—a departure that for John includes his death, resurrection, and ascension—and as part of that preparation Jesus gives them a new commandment. This new commandment is at once straightforward and profound, both simple and supremely difficult. They are to love one another, and this love is to be sign to the world of their identification with Jesus. Others will know they are his disciples by their love for one another. From the perspective of 2000 years of Christian history, there is perhaps nothing more important that Jesus could have said to his disciples before his death, and yet it begs a question: Can love, in fact, be commanded? Can I truly be ordered to love, say, those who are trying to kill me, or damage my reputation, or treat me in disrespectful ways?

In last week's sermon, I suggested that God seems to desire a relationship of love with us, along with all the ambiguity that this kind of relationship entails, rather than one of intellectual tidiness or doctrinal certainty. I used an analogy of two people falling in love to help us understand that relationship. Today, I want to discuss why that analogy is actually not adequate to capture the notion of love discussed in this morning's lesson from John's gospel.

Human beings definitely fall into and out of love with each other or with God all the time but, as many of us probably know, in the original Greek language of the New Testament there were no less than *six* words that are often translated into English with one term, love, and three of these show up in the New Testament itself. Eros is one of those six Greek words that most of us know. It that does not appear in the New Testament and it is the kind of love most of us think about when we talk about "falling in love." In popular understanding today we tend to reduce its meaning to erotic love, and it does include erotic love, but originally its meaning was much richer than this. Eros has to do with the kind love that moves us toward that which we desire, and as such it can be directed toward a lover, toward beauty or a goal, or, indeed, toward God. So, when I spoke of falling in love last week as an analogy to our relationship with God, I was not completely off base; it's just not the whole story.

Of the three Greek words for love that show up in the New Testament, one refers to what we typically think of as deep friendship, the other to the affection between parents and their children, and the last, agape, to the kind of love that Jesus refers to in today's lesson from John. It is this last notion of love that I want us to consider this morning. For no one can command us to fall in love—desires can be disciplined but they seem to arise and dissipate without conscious effort

on our part; indeed, they can often be unruly or fickle. However, Jesus is commanding his disciples to love each other as he and, by implication, his Father in heaven have loved them. The term used for love in this case, agape, again raises the question of how it can be understood such that we might be commanded to love.

Early followers of Jesus took this Greek term and, in essence, transformed its meaning. Originally, agape referred to a kind of wide, perhaps somewhat amorphous, love for humankind generally, but early Christians applied it to God's love for us and, by extension, to the love we are to have for God and each other. It is the kind of love used in the Jesus' Summary of the Law in Matthew: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind," and "Love your neighbor as yourself." But again, how could we be commanded or ordered to have such a love? I may not like my neighbor very much, let alone love him or her!

The answer to this question is that agape is understood as less a feeling or a desire, though it may include these as well, and more as an action. Agape is often understood as self-sacrificial actions, and it can mean this, but we must be very careful in concluding that it must *always* entail self-sacrifice. I've said this before, but the feminists have a valid point when they argue that too often the church has expected women to be the ones who are doing all the sacrificing. In any case, loving one's enemies does not necessarily mean having warm feelings toward them, but it does mean treating them respectfully to the extent they permit it and considering their well-being in our decisions regarding them. Agape is welcoming visitors among us, regardless of their socio-economic standing or how similar they are to us. Agape is working with and for the poor and disenfranchised—as

individuals, as groups, and structurally as in our concern for social justice. And, dare I say it in today's political climate? Agape is inclusive, universally inclusive, not exclusive. As God's rain falls equally on the just and the unjust, so should our love, agape, be freely given, far and wide. It is perfectly reasonable to be exclusive in our love as it concerns, say, our spouse or perhaps even our children (though not without limits), but it is not reasonable from the perspective of agape to be exclusive. Equality is perhaps the guiding principle of agape-motivated actions, with perhaps the exception of the poor and vulnerable—the Abrahamic traditions tend grant a privileged place to these categories of people.

So, how can love as agape be commanded? We can be commanded to act with agape-love regardless of our feelings or desires, though our *attitude* in such actions can be transformed as our feelings and desires catch up with our actions. We actually have a very good example of agape in today's lesson from Acts. In an *extremely* important and far-reaching decision by the early church, Peter is moved not to make a distinction between Jew and Gentile in the offering of salvation or the Spirit. He was moved to inclusivity in the face of tremendous pressure to maintain rigid social boundaries. If he were not, Christianity would have remained a Jewish sect, if it survived at all, and likely we would not be here today.

Agape changed the disciples, and by their love for each other and those around them the disciples changed the world. We, as disciples, are commanded by our Savior and friend, Jesus, to continue acting with that transformative love. It is, again, at once straightforward and profound, both simple and supremely difficult. We are to love one another and that "one another" is to include all the world. By this, we will be known as followers of Jesus. Amen.