

ADD LOVE

If you watched the news Thursday, you saw a story about an 11 million dollar judgement against the Kansas-based Westboro Baptist Church. A grieving father sued the fundamentalist church for intruding on the privacy of the March 2006 funeral of his son who was killed in Iraq.

This isn't the first funeral protest for Pastor Fred Phelps and his rabid followers. They have a shame-filled history of disgusting public demonstrations. Their "gospel" is summed up in three little words: "God hates America." They sing those words to the tune *God Bless America* as they placard their venom in front of grieving families.

Kind of makes you wince at being a Baptist!

Words that were once descriptive and honorable can pick up connotations and associations that make you wish for new ones. Sometimes you want to start over and find another term to express your identity. No wonder emergent churches choose names like: Mosaic, Solomon's Porch, The River, and Ikon. They can fill their name with their own unique identity without being tagged with old associations.

Jesus did something like that. When Jesus came, he preached a kingdom gospel that had at its core a single, unifying moral and ethical value – love. Jesus said that love was the greatest commandment in the law: loving God and loving people. It was so basic to what he was about, that he called it a new commandment, even though it had been in force from the foundation of the world: Love one another.

But how would his audience hear that new command? The Greek language had a number of synonyms for love, each with their own shade of meaning. *Philos* spoke to the warmth of friendship – *philema* was a kiss. *Philadelphia* was brother-love. The Greeks cherished *eros*, a word that sparkled with life and passion. *Storge* was a love word describing parents' warm and tender affection for their children.

But sometimes you just have to start over. God's love was so unique that Jesus picked a relatively unused, colorless word that he could fill with his own meaning: *agapē*. *Agapē* could mean something as simple as fondness or respect. It sometimes communicated little more than that you were pleased with someone. It was a little word in the wider Greek world of affection. The Jews who translated the OT Hebrew into Greek made the unlikely choice of *agapē* as the word to express God's love for his people.

One use of *agapē* described "...a generous move by one for the sake of another" (*Dictionary of NT Theology*). We might call it an act of kindness. But it got at the core of the kind of love that characterized God, a generosity of being that expressed itself in meeting needs.

God's love was full of emotional power, but it wasn't energized by emotions. God loved because it was his nature to do so, not because his heart was warmed by those he loved. It's origin was within himself – God can't not love.

For instance, when we looked at *philadelphia* – brother-love – last week, we said it was the kind of affection that existed between siblings, people already in relationship. I love with a warmth of affection because the other is my brother. The impetus for my affection is my response to our relationship.

God's love initiates from within himself simply because another is there, or because he or she has a need. It comes out of an internal disposition to seek the other's benefit and to bless that has little or nothing to do with anything endearing in the other. It doesn't need love feelings in order to act. The impetus to *agapē* comes from within one's self. It is not stirred in response to anything in the other. Get in front of someone with *agapē* and you're going to get loved.

Agapē caps Peter's list of seven virtues.

God's power has given us everything we need for godly living. God's promises enable us to participate in the divine nature – to replicate God's own character in us, to be like Jesus. Because of this, Peter urges us to all diligence: add to faith goodness – moral excellence. And to moral excellence, knowledge. To knowledge, add self-control, and to self-control add perseverance – that long obedience in the same direction. To perseverance add godliness – living like God matters. To godliness, add *philadelphia* – brother-love. And to brother-love add *agapē* – that virtue that resides in the inner person of the heart from which self-less acts of kindness and caring come.

In another NT virtue list, the Apostle Paul mirrored Peter's choice to place *agapē* at the top of the hierarchy of virtues. Paul wrote: "Therefore, as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. Bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you. And over all these virtues put on love, which *binds them all together in perfect unity*" (Col. 3:12-14).

Mark Buchanan calls *agapē* "unprovoked love." Unprovoked is a word we usually associate with violence and anger. We speak, for instance, of an *unprovoked* attack. "Unprovoked love", Buchanan writes, "...seeks those who never saw it coming, who never had it coming, who never sought it out. It shows up unannounced, unexpected, undeserved" (*Hidden In Plain Sight*).

That's how God loved us: "You see, at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly. Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous man, though for a good man someone might possibly dare to die. But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us" (Romans 5:6-8).

Unprovoked love – God loved us simply because it is his nature to love. He loved us when we were his enemies – still sinners, and he gave up his own Son in order to win us back to himself.

Now, Peter says, you go love like that. You are God's children, and Christ is being formed in you. So layer *agapē* over *philadelphia*. You do well to love your brothers and sisters in Christ. Go one step more and offer Christ's love to the world.

When Jesus taught about loving, he pushed us to the limit. We get the idea of loving each other in God's family. Jesus said: "Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be sons of your Father in heaven. He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous" (Mt. 5:44-45).

Luke, in his Gospel, records a fuller edition of Jesus' words. In addition to loving and praying for our enemies, Jesus tells us to do good to those who hate us, to bless them, even when they curse us. He instructs us not to react in kind to contempt and insult, but to be generous and lend freely, not expecting to be repaid. That kind of love has God's fingerprints all over it.

It must have God's fingerprints on it, because it sure doesn't have mine! Everything in me and in my world justifies my right to revenge – to preemptive strikes. Get in my face and you're gonna get nuked! I protect me and mine – what's love got to do with it?

Think of that word, enemy. Whose face floats into your mind? Does he live in your house? Is she at school? In the neighborhood? At work?

I've got one – sharply etched. I can still see his face, distorted with rage. I can hear his angry rant punctuated with obscenities. How do you pray for someone like that? How do you bless them and will their good? How do you love them?

Jesus isn't saying we cannot protect ourselves and our loved ones. He is not saying we have no recourse to civil law for those who injure us. He's calling us to be so rooted in God's

unprovoked love that even enemies get loved – those least deserving, because God’s love has nothing to do with what’s deserved. If it did, we never would have experienced it.

The Apostle John wrote: “...love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God. ...This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins. ...We love because he first loved us” (1 John 4:7-19).

G. K. Chesterton was a much-beloved British writer who died in 1936. He was a believer whose brilliant wit and curmudgeonly style endeared him to other believers and non-believers alike. Chesterton once wrote that his favorite fairy tale was *Beauty and the Beast* because it taught that “Unlovely things must be deeply loved before they become lovable.”

I would change that slightly: “Unlovely things must be deeply loved before they become able to love.”

We are the sinful beasts who have been loved by God’s Beauty. We love because we *are* loved. Loved people love people. We have been the recipients of God’s saving *agapē* and have been welcomed into God’s family. We have tasted mercy and grace – we’re not getting what we deserve. God’s unprovoked love works itself deep into our hearts – we participate in the divine nature. And then that love flows out in our own unprovoked love for others. Love expresses itself as we say “Yes” to the gentle impulses of the Holy Spirit who prompts that love.

Those we love may not feel loved:

- The alcoholic whose family confronts him with an intervention may not *feel* loved, but he is being loved deeply.
- A believer drifting into serious sin may not *feel* loved when a sister gently and insistently speaks truth into her life, but she is being loved deeply. In fact, our failure to love often shows up when our silence isn’t golden, but yellow.
- Our enemy may not feel loved when we choose to do him a kindness, but he is being loved none-the-less.

The measure of our love is not what others experience, but whether or not what we do in loving expresses Christ’s own loving presence in our hearts.

Love adopts a posture of blessing. It seeks the good on behalf of others. It doesn’t need a why – that’s just the way it is.

Love isn’t something I can conjure up on my own. Like Paul, I am convinced “...that nothing good lives in me, that is, in my sinful nature. For I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out” (Rom. 7:18). Frankly, much of the time, I don’t even have the desire to love like God loves.

So when Peter tells me to add love to my arsenal of virtues, and I determine that I want to do that very thing, I’m driven to the heart of God himself. I am driven back to God’s power, and to those very great and precious promises by which I may participate in the divine nature – promises of God’s unfailing love and faithfulness, of Christ’s presence, of the Holy Spirit, of God’s word etched upon my heart, of God’s capacity enabling my obedience. I pursue *agapē* because it uniquely reflects the character of God. I love because God energizes that virtue in my heart.

I’m not sure that our ladder of virtues involves an ascending order of difficulty. I would be hard pressed, for instance, to say that knowledge is more of an accomplishment than goodness. But I do believe that *agapē* deserves its place at the top. It is the one virtue that is most like God and least like the rest of us. So much so that Jesus made *agapē* the distinguishing mark of his followers. People connect us to Jesus when we love like he loved – it is that rare a thing.

Peter has urged upon us these seven virtues. He calls us to bring to bear all diligence, to give it everything we’ve got building them into our lives: goodness, knowledge, self-control, perseverance, godliness, brother-love – and now this last, the piece that is most like God himself

– love.

May we, then, who bear Christ’s name “Be imitators of God...as dearly loved children and live a life of love, just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us...” (Ephesians 5:1-2).