

Agape Notes

John 17:20-26

Months later I am still impressed by the job Isabelle Conner did as the preacher on Youth Sunday. She was thoughtful and poised, had a point and made it, and used a memorable illustration: the agape note. As she explained, agape is the Greek word for Christlike love. It is that kind of love that serves others, that sticks around for the long haul. Built on empathy and sympathy, agape enables us truly to treasure others. Isabelle had us write agape notes to random folks in the church that day. The Christian Nurture Commission asked us to write them to Cheryl Moles upon her retirement. Periodically writing agape notes makes a terrific habit.

Bible scholars call John 17 Jesus' High Priestly Prayer. We might call its last seven verses his Agape Prayer. Let us take these two labels in order. "High Priestly" refers to that part of Jesus' identity having to do with mediating between God and humanity. He is the connector, the conduit, the conveyor of God's infinite and inapproachable nature to us. The High Priest in Jerusalem also supervised Temple worship, including the various forms of animal sacrifice on the altar. One key facet of Jesus' priestly work was his sacrifice on the cross. In keeping with all this Jesus speaks in the early parts of this chapter of glorifying God, of speaking the words God gave him to speak to humanity, and of his impending departure from this world—by which he means his death, resurrection and ascension. He finishes this part of his

prayer with a petition that God might protect those who follow him.

We picked up Jesus' prayer at this point, where he pivots to focus on praying for "these" and "those". The "these" refers to his disciples, whom he had already asked God to protect. Now he adds his petition for "those who believe in me through (the disciples') word." He has four requests to make: that they (we) be one, that we may be "in" Christ and "in God", that the world might know of God's love through our love, and that we might ultimately be reunited with himself.

To be "in Christ" is to experience a mutual indwelling. Through the work of the Holy Spirit those in Christ experience what Jesus concluded his prayer with: "that the love with which thou hast loved me may be in them, and I in them." Or as commentator Leon Morris puts it, "We know the love of God because the Son dwells in our hearts." Being in Christ means having the love of God in our hearts. Our more evangelical Christian sisters and brothers speak of having a saving relationship with Jesus. This refers to this very indwelling. Some of them believe we must be able to date the moment in which we first experienced it. I have always felt that is unnecessary, though if a person has had a remarkable first encounter with the love of God it must feel like quite the gift. For my part, I cannot recall a time when I did believe in the love of God because I am so blessed that I cannot recall a time when I did not feel loved.

The Gospel of John contains a number of lengthy prayers Jesus is supposed to

have made out loud in the presence of his disciples. We cannot prove—or disprove, for that matter—who wrote any of the four Gospels. And I will admit that often I find the lengthy debates over their identity unimportant. In this case, however, if we can agree on who wrote John we can draw a larger point out of this High Priestly Prayer. From the earliest written records, from about the turn of the first century, the church's chroniclers have speculated the author of John was the “beloved disciple”. John. Of brothers James and John fame. The guys who last week we caught trying to get Jesus to promise them surpassing glory when he came again in his glory. If this John did write this Gospel he may have heard Jesus make this prayer. And if in the ages before digital recording devices he could not have gotten Jesus' words down perfectly, he nevertheless may very well have written them with useful accuracy .

In this final third of his High Priestly Prayer Jesus asks God to protect his followers, to empower them to become unified, to make us be “in” Christ and “in God”, to reveal God's love through our love, and to unite with himself. The very next thing that will happen in the Gospel of John is his arrest. That is, his final plea, on his final day of freedom, is that we might experience the mutual indwelling of the Spirit. This is critically important to Jesus. He knows he is about to make the ultimate sacrifice. He wants his followers to understand why before he does.

Speaking of sacrifice, people who run toward fires or the sound of gunfire never fail to impress. Throughout the unrest following the murder of George Floyd last year I felt it was inappropriate and counterproductive to generalize the guilt of one man,

Derrick Chauvin, and apply it to every cop. By all means, convict him for his crime. By all means, hold all who protect and serve accountable to the highest standards of conduct. Perhaps I feel this way because my maternal grandfather was a cop. Whatever the cause, I have great respect for most of them.

The past two weeks in Terre Haute ought to have given us all pause. We do not know the murderer's motive. Yes, I have heard the rumors about Greg Ferency flying around. But until court-admissible proof is reliably reported I choose not to care. The man was gunned down. Whether he was personally meant to be the victim does not matter. He was killed and now his children have no father. As more than one of you have observed, we are all the poorer for his loss. He was a tenacious detective and a gifted teacher. Tom Bogigian and I attended a conference on church security at which he spoke. He came across as incredibly well informed and had a clear, needed message to convey. We were impressed.

Monday and Tuesday were crazy downtown. They reversed the direction of two one-way streets and then used them as parking lots for the hundreds of police vehicles that came from all around. They closed the parking garage and then used it to stage the funeral procession. Tuesday I found myself standing in a line behind an extremely tall woman. She turned around and I saw she was Lieutenant Governor Suzanne Crouch. She asked if we had met and I said yes, when Jon Ford invited me to give the invocation at a statehouse session. She pretended she remembered. Later at least two of us in the church offices watched the funeral, the procession and

the internment live on our computers.

As the pall-bearers folded the American flag that had draped Detective Ferency's casket, the camera zoomed in on one of them. We could see the sweat literally pouring in a steady stream off the rim of his hat. His face was scarlet. And yet he continued to fold that flag precisely and unhurriedly, following the protocol they had rehearsed at exactly the stately pace required. A man who had sworn to serve and protect, to sacrifice for the public, a man wearing a heavy uniform with a coat and hat in the hot sun, refused to do anything other than his duty. Who can say exactly what motivated him? Did he know the deceased personally? Had he lost other brother and sister officers? Is he just a stickler for detail? In the end it does not matter. He did the job and he did it right and by so doing he honored a dead man.

As Jesus made his High Priestly Prayer he knew he would get nailed to his cross in less than twelve hours. Yet he loved God so much he trusted the plan. And he loved his followers so much he yearned—prayed—for us to experience that love in our inner beings. He wanted for us that mutual indwelling, that shared experience of the love of God that creates unity, indwells the Holy Spirit for us, makes agape love visible and makes us one with Christ.

Agape love can empower any church to weather even the hardest of times. We currently face an issue here at Central. It is not the hardest of times—not by a long shot. But it does have the potential to disrupt our unity and to diminish our capacity to

conduct the ministries to which we believe God has called us. I refer to the decision to witness to the community that we are a welcoming, inclusive church by placing a sign out on our front walk. I refer to this issue without taking any side on it from the pulpit. Instead, I want to speak of something that happened Wednesday night.

A month ago the elders received a request to consider putting up a yard sign with the Presbyterian Church (USA)'s symbol in gay pride colors. The petitioners asked only that the elders think about it. They specifically asked the elders take a month to consider it. But in that meeting the elders got caught up in a wave of enthusiasm. They voted to go ahead and we had a sign on our yard within days. It caused a fair amount of feedback, some of it positive, some quite negative. We realized we needed to talk it over again at our next meeting, last Wednesday. The discussion was direct and passionate. But it was also respectful, careful and sensitive. We conducted ourselves, in a word, with agape. And by so doing we gave this church the chance to work through this issue with unity.

You can read about the new session actions regarding signs in this week's enews. Again, the point for now is that when we allow the indwelling Holy Spirit to move us to love like Christ loves, the power of God to make love concrete is irresistible. As we continue to process this, and all, issues, may we always remember the example set by those elders the other night. May we love, as best we can, like Christ loves. May we send our agape notes within and beyond this congregation.