

The Rev. Joan M. Kilian

Trinity Episcopal Church

Jeremiah 1: 4 – 10
 1 Corinthians 13: 1 – 13

Psalm 71: 1 – 6
 Luke 4: 21 – 30

So. Here we are. I do think it's a little funny that the Gospel lesson for today is about the congregation driving the preacher out of town. But that isn't what's going on here and that isn't what I'm going to preach about. Instead, I want to talk about love.

“And now faith, hope and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love.” So writes Paul in one of the most well known and beloved passages from Scripture. A passage that is frequently used at both weddings and funerals. A passage that has some of the most beautifully descriptive language about love found anywhere. A passage that reminds us who we have been created to be.

“Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never ends.”

There's only one catch: these words aren't really always true, are they? Love never ends. Ask someone grieving who can never experience the smile, the touch, the embrace of a loved one again. Ask someone whose fairy tale marriage has ended in divorce. Ask someone who has been abused in the name of 'love.' Even in ordinary circumstances, we have to be honest and admit that the way any of us love is imperfect. We can indeed be impatient, arrogant, rude, irritable, resentful and insist on our way. So why does Paul write that “love never ends” or in some translations, “love never fails?”

In the original Greek of Paul's letter, he is using the word *αγαπε* for love. *Αγαπε* is one of four Greek words for love in Paul's culture: *ερωσ*, *στοργε*, *φιλεω* and *αγαπε*. It would be impossible to draw clear lines of distinction between these nuanced understandings of love, for they often overlap and intertwine. *Ερωσ*, is romantic, passionate, inspired-by-attraction love. *Ερωσ* is never used in any of the New Testament writings or even in the Greek version of the Hebrew Scriptures, the Septuagint. *Στοργε* is a natural, almost instinctual, kind of love that one has for a child or parent or spouse or pet. *Στοργε* is used only a few times in the New Testament, and when it is, it is in the negative, that is, in the lacking of such a love, or being heartless. Paul uses it to refer to fallen humanity. *Φιλεω*, as in philanthropy, is affinity, friendship or a fondness for something. It involves the lover's own enjoyment. (Philanthropy = *φιλεω* + *ανθρωπος*) In the synoptic Gospels, it, too, is often in the negative, e.g. “those who *love* to stand and pray in the synagogues”. In John's Gospel, however, it is used positively to describe the love between God the Father and God the Son, between Jesus and Lazarus, and Jesus' love for his disciples. However, the kind of love that John most closely associates with God – like Paul does – is *αγαπε*.

Αγαπε is a love that longs for the well-being of the beloved. It is *αγαπε*, a self-giving love willed by the lover, which can remain strong even when the beloved turns away. It is *αγαπε* that bears all things, hopes all things, endures all things. It is God's *αγαπε*, God's self-giving love, that never fails. While *αγαπε* is not commonly used in other literature of the time, it is used more than 300 times in the New Testament. It is the kind of love which God gives us and therefore, the kind of love we should have for one another.

For Paul, *αγαπε* love is everything. He refers to it as a ‘still more excellent way.’ “If I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith so that I can move mountains, but I don’t have *αγαπε* love, I am nothing.” The difference between this kind of love and all the others is that *αγαπε* love doesn’t begin with us and our limitations, fallibilities and expectations. Instead, *αγαπε* love begins with God and God’s love for us.

The *αγαπε* love which is the very heart, the energy, of the Holy Trinity is what overflowed to become Creation. It is the love that came to dwell among us in Jesus. It is the love that enabled Jesus, dying on the cross, to ask God to forgive those responsible. *Αγαπε* love is unconditional, it is dependable, it doesn’t expect anything in return. *Αγαπε* love is not an emotion; it is a decision, an act of the will; it is an action verb.

There’s a familiar Christian song, written in the 1960s and inspired by John 13:35 with this refrain: “And they’ll know we are Christians by our love, by our love, and they’ll know we are Christians by our love.” It’s *αγαπε* love to which the lyrics refer, and it describes one of the underlying strengths of this congregation (*this* Trinity) and the ministry that we have shared over these many years.

It would be relatively easy at this point to run a long list of statistics regarding this congregation over the last nearly seventeen years. How much money we raised to purchase things for this property like the organ or to create the Memorial Garden. We could count how many sheep are in the flock from baptisms and how many bright flames burn as a result of confirmations and receptions. We could tally up how many dollars we have raised for other organizations, both within the larger church and outside of it. But really, it’s the numbers we don’t exactly know, numbers that are the result of the *αγαπε* love of our ministry together, that I find more interesting. More like the ripple effects of our love out into this community and far beyond.

How many people have been able to keep their lights on, or an oxygen pump running, or a roof over their babies’ heads, or to provide a simple meal for their family with your contributions to the clergy discretionary funds and the thousands of items we have contributed to the Food Bank?

How many children and adults who need assistance have felt the warmth of your caring and the reminder of Christ’s love at Christmas from the hundreds of Angel Tree gifts you have provided?

Rebecca’s Café all began with a simple question after a Sunday service about addressing food insecurity in Statesboro and Bulloch County. How many thousands of people have been nourished by the planning and the donations of your time, labor and sometimes food? And how many others in the community have we enabled to participate in this community?

Who has had hope kindled, or perhaps a life transformed, through the jail and prison ministries we have had?

How much of an impact has Trinity been able to make in caring for the environment with our recycling and reuse? While we have transported thousands of items to the county recycling centers over the years, we’re now participating in ‘Boro Recycling which picks up our plastics (all kinds) and glass and metal once a week. How many people outside of Trinity might we have influenced by our practice of using real dishes and cups, & recycling bins in the kitchen and office?

What about the international sailors whose heads are warmer, the residents of nursing homes who have scarves around their necks, those who are wrapped in love with prayer shawls in the midst of illness, little girls and boys around the world who now have a dress or pants, and members of the military who have been comforted by having a stitched prayer bear in their pocket, all thanks to Loving Hands?

How much research into cancer treatment has Trinity funded over the years in our participation in Relay for Life, raising probably at least \$75K?

How many local organizations have been able to fund their missions just a little bit better through all of our Benefit Performance series, which were also a result of a parishioner asking if we could do something with the wonderful acoustics of this space?

How has – or how will – having their very own home made/make a difference to three families through our helping to build two Habitat Homes and with STARfish, furnishing an apartment for a Congolese refugee family?

How many children's lives are changed as a result of all of the scholarships we have funded for the Dominican Republic? And how many others have seen our love at work through youth and adult missionaries to the DR? And how will we ever know how much our showing up three times to help clean up and rebuild after Hurricane Katrina changed the lives of people in Pass Christian, MS?

How much has our visible support for social justice in this community by our involvement in the MLK Jr. parade, the Community Worship Services, Laundry Love, Black Lives Matter marches, the Women's marches and the Science March, among other things, helped influence the hearts and minds of others in this community?

How many young people – teenagers and college students, some of whom have been part of the Episcopal Church and many who were not - have had seeds of faith planted and/or nurtured through our youth programs and college ministry?

How have our contributions to Episcopal Relief and Development, the Episcopal Diocese of Jerusalem, World Vision and Heifer Project helped far-flung places around the world in ways that we don't even know?

Whose hearts have been 'strangely warmed' by the incredible music offered in this space?

What have been the effects of the nearly three dozen people who have graduated from or participated in Education for Ministry as they employ their grounding in the faith in their lives?

What *αγαπε* love has been shared by each of you in the places where you work or play or volunteer in this community, like Hospice, or the Library, or the Averitt Center, or the Botanic Garden, or Boys and Girls Club, or a host of other places? How has your faith sustained or lifted others in this community and way beyond when they needed it most? What do you suppose the ripple effects have been from people who have been a part of this faith community but who have moved away to carry that love and that faith to a new place? And how much has any of all of this changed grown our faith and changed our lives?

How has the love that we have had for one another found it's home in the joys and the sorrows that we have shared together over the years, with births and baptisms, with weddings and ordinations, with illnesses and deaths, and amidst the ordinariness of everyday life?

I could go on and on, but at some point, we have three people to baptize, a tree to plant and a celebration to be had. We have done good work together, but there is more work to be done. By you. And by me. In a few moments, we will have three new Christians to help raise up in the faith, showing them what *αγαπε* love looks like through the lens of Trinity. As Marjorie and Maya and Michael are baptized, you will promise to do all in your power to support these persons in their life in Christ. And we will all renew our baptismal covenants in which, as I ask the five "Will you" questions, I want us to think about how each of those is a manifestation of agape love, in this season of Epiphany, a manifestation of God's love.

It's been said that if we substitute "Jesus" or "Christ" for every mention made of love in this passage from First Corinthians, then we will begin to see through a mirror darkly the love for which [and out of which] we were made. I have a t-shirt now for Laundry Love that reads "Love never ends.

Neither does laundry.” It’s a metaphor for the life that we have been called to live as Christians. The love we have for others starts with the love which comes from God. That love of God never fails, never ends. And neither does living out our faith through agape love.

Will they know that we are Christians by our love? Yes, I believe they will. Thank you for all these years of growing and sharing and loving in the faith of Jesus Christ. Amen. +