

AGAPE YOUR NEIGHBOR

Let us begin and end this homily with appreciation and reaffirmation. The notion, the concept, the possibility of “loving your neighbor” is beautiful and appealing. It is the possibility of light in an otherwise dark world. It is one of the great concepts, and it has inspired human awakening and endeavor for the last one hundred and thirty generations (three thousand two hundred fifty years). It is the quintessence of the commandments, and sages of many ages and traditions have claimed that if we truly love our neighbor, we have fulfilled the LAW – done all that Torah requires – and attained righteousness. Christian carelessness to the contrary, Jesus did not invent this concept. It appears first in Leviticus 19:18. Its negative counterpart appears in Buddhism almost five hundred years before Jesus, yet long after Leviticus. “Do not do unto another what you would not want them to do to you.” In any case, Jesus adds His affirmation:

“But when the Pharisees heard that he had silenced the Sadducees, they came together. And one of them, a lawyer, asked him a question, to test him. ‘Teacher, which is the great commandment in the law?’ And Jesus said to him, ‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments depend all the law and the prophets.’” (Matthew 22:34-40)

What if everywhere we went in this wide world, we could trust people to not mislead us, at least not on purpose. Of course, they would be able to trust us too. And if any of us said that we loved someone, we would not cheat on them, abandon them, or try, for our own ends, to turn them into something they are not. *Agapeo* means “I have your best interests at heart.” At its height, it means, “I see you as a child of God, and I want you to know it and to come into your own – into your full identity and purpose.” The six times “love your neighbor” is mentioned in the New Testament, *agapeo* is the word being translated as “love.”

There are people in the world who have no desire or intention of loving their neighbor. But most of us are not among them. We would, in fact, be bereft if rightly accused of having no neighbor love. Often we are troubled because we do know situations where we are not living up to this precept. Some people even stop praying, or at least they stop the open-dialogue kind of prayer, because every time they try it, they get

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messages about neighbors they could care about, or at least care about more. When we face a precept this high and realize we can never fully live up to it, we have a choice. We can either honor it, keep it as a beacon, and keep trying to live toward its truth, or we can try to reduce it down to something more manageable – something we can live up to and be comfortable with. In other words, we hide the real concept from our consciousness and go back to doing the best we can by our own light.

There are endless ways to duck and dodge the commandment to “love your neighbor” and reduce it down to something more manageable – something we can pretend we keep, fulfill, and live up to. But people who think they live up to the requirements of this commandment either have no concept of its meaning or are lying to themselves. Of course, there is always an exception. “The self-deceived have no need to lie.”

Every thinking, caring person is troubled as well as inspired by this concept. What is love? Who is my neighbor? I may love a few people more than myself and maybe a few others as much as myself, but it does not seem possible to love very many people as much as I should if I am aware that they are all God’s precious children. And there are so *many* people! And there is trouble, pain, loneliness, and need everywhere we look and for as far as we can see. These are not new or strange concerns invented in our time. The parable of The Good Samaritan was told in answer to this very same struggle: Who is my neighbor?

So also, at any time or place, a person who is tired of working on their own pilgrimage and shortcomings can turn to us and accuse us of not loving our neighbors as much as we should. And they are right, at least technically. They are also wrong, since they just broke the precept themselves.

Happily and gratefully, I live in a faith family – this church – where most of you honor this precept and try sincerely to live by its light. Happily also, I live in a faith family which is fully aware that we never fulfill this commandment, and that in fact it is not possible to do so in a broken world. By definition, to fulfill this commandment is to *be* in the Kingdom of Heaven. And every time we love our neighbor or they love us, we get a little taste of the Kingdom. But if we do not realize how high this commandment really is, we either drive ourselves insane or start lying to ourselves about how well we are living up to its requirements. It takes only a moment of serious thought to realize that if “neighbor love” governed life on earth, there would be peace and prosperity everywhere on our globe.

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The degree to which this is not the case is also the degree to which we fall short of fulfilling this commandment. Here endeth all pretense that we do in fact and in deed love our neighbors as ourselves. Here also endeth all pretense that we do not need a Savior.

Happily and gratefully, I live in a faith family that goes on trying to “love your neighbor” when opportunity and possibility occur, undaunted by the impossibility of fulfilling the precept in any absolute or perfect sense. We do the best we can, under willing and obedient guidance from the Holy Spirit (which is another concept we can never perfectly fulfill). And for all that is beyond us and all that is to come, we trust our Lord. Therefore, despite our partiality and imperfection, our lives are lifted and blessed, and even sometimes happy. So when we contemplate the commandment to love our neighbors as ourselves, it is essential – imperative – to remember that *fulfilling the Law does not save us*. We are already loved, adored, precious in God’s eyes, even though we cannot imagine why. That is the Message of the Gospel. By the way, without that Gospel, “love your neighbor” would make no sense at all. If there is no God of love – if we are the only ones in the universe doing the loving – it is a sad and pathetic venture at best. But for us, at least, that is not the case. Thank you Jesus, Lord and Christ!

If I remind you that the commandment to love your neighbor is too high to fulfill in any absolute way, does that take us off the hook? Does that invite us to be lazy and selfish and uncaring? Some people think so. But they also think that they are the only ones who are really loving, and that none of the rest of us really want to be loving. Therefore they keep trying to shame us or scold us into loving. Now *there’s* a theology for you: love through shame, guilt, coercion, and the threat of dire punishment. But a good deal of the world has been trying to improve things with such methods for as far back as our records go. Finally Jesus came to show and teach us: You cannot get there from the Law. Only love begets love ... and the Omnipotent One – Abba – loves you. But in most places we keep reversing what Jesus taught and showed us, so that we can get back to what we know works: guilt, shame, threat of punishment. “I hate everybody who does not love everybody.”

To be sure, it is tragic and pathetic that there is not more love on the earth. But it is also tragic and pathetic that those who realize how much we need more love on the earth *do* frequently bring hatred and judgment – guilt, fear, and shame – in their very efforts to increase love on the earth. I have, as some of you know, been hated and rejected by many people over the years. I have been very well loved too, but never

mind that for the moment. From a certain perspective, I have deserved the hatred. I am hated by conservative Christians because I do astrology and do not believe in the Virgin Birth, the Second Coming, or traditional views of Hell, and mostly because I really believe Jesus when He insists that God loves us. I am hated by liberal Christians because I think their notions of bringing justice and peace and their ways of trying to help people are shallow and wrong-headed and willful because they do not put prayer and obedience to Christ at the center of their efforts and programs. They think they can save the world with their own logic and intelligence, so they pay little attention to the true Savior, who is our only hope.

But most humorous to me, in the array of those who hate me, are the proponents of “unconditional love.” I think unconditional love is a crock of baloney. But they claim to believe it and live by it. Yet they get livid, angry, and rejecting when I do not agree with their concept. So can I fail to notice that there is at least one condition on unconditional love: that I have to agree with them?

As I say, I may deserve the hatred I receive. I work hard for it and am seldom surprised by it. But then, I do not follow the make-believe, namby-pamby Jesus that has been superimposed on most of our culture and most of our religious institutions.

“I came not to bring peace, but a sword.” (Matthew 10:34)

“Woe to you when all men speak well of you.” (Luke 6:26) “This world is estranged from God, and if you follow me, I will reconcile you to God – and then you will be out of tune and estranged in this world.” To be well-adjusted in this world is a horrible insult to any person who claims to be a Christian.

“Remember the word that I said to you, ‘A servant is not greater than his master.’ If they persecuted me, they will persecute you; if they kept my word, they will keep yours also. But all this they will do to you on my account, because they do not know him who sent me.” (John 15:20-21)

“Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.” (Matthew 5:10) Do you think Jesus was only talking to other people, who lived long ago?

I still believe Jesus is THE WAY. And the Way toward love. And the Way we come to trust God’s love for us and all others, even in the here and now. But He also shatters all naiveté – crosses will do that! And He redefines all concepts of genuine love by how He lives and what He teaches – and by how He dies ... and rises again.

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Not very much of it, probably, but *some* of our confusion about love is coming from language problems. If the concept itself is wrong in our minds because of language – word usage – that makes it more difficult to get things clear in our heads. In my lifetime we have significantly changed the meanings of many words, and even changed the words themselves. In the King James Version of the Bible, for instance, we read: *“Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, and have not charity, I am become as sounding brass, or a tinkling cymbal.... Charity suffereth long, and is kind Charity never faileth And now abideth faith, hope, charity, these three; but the greatest of these is charity.”* (I Corinthians 13) Hello?!

Your grandmother, if she was religious, had a different expectation of herself when she contemplated “love.” She did not confuse charity with romantic, emotional attachments. You are not in the same control of “love” as you are of “charity.” Charity is a choice. We can decide to be charitable or not to be charitable. We can decide to do deeds of charity whenever we are willing to pay the price. We *do* have a choice about how we will respond and react to love, but we do not have a lot of say about who we love or how much. If we did, we would not have any broken hearts; we would just turn off the switch. Not in recent years, but there were times in the past when I decided earnestly and sincerely to stop loving Mariana. Love just laughed in my face. I could not stop it any more than I started it.

I cannot remember exactly how long it took me to fall in love with Mariana. Probably minutes. Certainly less than an hour. It was at a gathering of college students at Pilgrim Pines in California. Mariana was still in high school and actually had no business being there. But the youth leader at her church was getting interested, so he fudged a little. Big mistake. She liked him too and gave me no encouragement, but I *was* encouraged to learn that she was heading for the University of Redlands in the fall. I would be a sophomore by then, and I would be waiting for her. But I also remember that just prior to Pilgrim Pines, after much thought and contemplation and trying to understand my experiences, I had concluded that it would be better if I never married, seeing that a minister’s life had so little time and room for family life. I was not wrong about this! But love laughed in my face back then too.

When we speak of neighbor love, has it anything to do with that kind of love? We better hope not. That kind of love destroys everyone it touches unless it heads straight into the bonds of marriage, or unless we refuse to respond to it. *Caritas* does not ask for – it does not depend

upon – personal, emotional involvement or attachment. It needs to keep distance – objectivity. It is caring, but not intimate. It wants the other person to have a better life. It sees the other person as a child of God, and longs to see this person come more into “their own,” as we say – more into their true identity and purpose. If the other kind of love starts to intrude, *caritas* will acknowledge within but refuse to respond. It will bank it, tuck it away, save it for a later realm. *Caritas* has the other person’s best interests at heart, and that other kind of love ends up destroying, except within the bonds of marriage. If you do not know this, either you are blinded by your own desires and needs or you are a very poor observer of the life going on all around you. To be charitable, I think most women understand this, though many of them do not act or behave accordingly. I suspect that many men understand this a lot more clearly at age seventy than they do at thirty-five or forty.

Most of the “charity” going on in our time is so generic that it has no genuine caring – money for programs run by people we do not know, for people we will never see. That is well below the definitions and requirements of *caritas*. “*Jesus replied, ‘A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and he fell among robbers, who stripped him and beat him, and departed, leaving him half dead.’*” (Luke 10:30) The priest and the Levite who passed by on the other side told their wives of the incident and how badly they felt for that poor man. The wives talked about it at synagogue the following Sabbath, and they decided to form an organization for the relief of people who got beaten on the Jericho Road. Everybody thought it a grand and loving idea, so they formed the organization, took up collections, and hired a person to patrol the Jericho Road and take care of anybody lying beaten by the side of the road. But the collections did not provide funds enough to buy beasts, and they knew they could not afford to pay for recuperation time at an inn for all the people lying beaten by the side of the road. So they provided Band-Aids and bottles of water to the person patrolling the Jericho Road for them, so that when he came upon anybody lying by the side of the road, he could give them some Band-Aids and a bottle of water. And everybody was very pleased because now people beaten on the Jericho Road would know that somebody cared about them, and hopefully they would realize in time that it was a sign that God loved them.

I do the best I can, but somehow I feel like this misses the essence of what Jesus is trying to tell us. Somewhere between the long-term commitment of romantic love that evolves into lifelong marriage and the generic do-gooding of nonpersonal programs with no passion for

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Christ in them, there dwells a caring that is deep and compelling. And it wants people to come into LIFE, to know God's love for them, to find their identity and purpose. It longs to see people come into their own because they have found The Presence: their own personal relationship with the Holy Spirit of our Risen Lord. *Agapeo! Agapeo your neighbor. "If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, and have not agape – I am nothing."*

Anybody can respond to the power of *agape* as an individual if they choose to. It is difficult to imagine any sincere, intentional Christian who does not do so in some fashion, whenever they can – whenever and however the Spirit leads them to do so. I know, perhaps better than any other single individual among us, how many of *you* do so. And most of you, by Jesus' instruction, do so quietly and, insofar as possible, in secret. I am often amazed and always grateful.

One of the most difficult dimensions of the life of the church, however, is putting together an approach filled with *agape* that we can participate in together. For one thing, Satan will take it down if he possibly can. For another, it is difficult to reach agreement on how, what, where, or when. It is always easier to do the familiar and to fall back into generic efforts and programs. However, they have about as much power and passion as they deserve. And they do about as much good as can be expected from the power and passion that they have. Rumor has it that I don't care about "loving your neighbor." If I had the time, I would resent that. Some people only pay attention to commandments that they are comfortable with and never get to number nine. But the truth is, I still hope and pray that one day this church will awaken to the possibility of some *agape* approaches and purposes that all of us who are willing can participate in together. It will not happen, however, until we stop being content with things as they are.

To borrow a phrase from a fellow member in the East Whittier Friends Church where I grew up: "Let me be perfectly clear." We do a lot in this church! The most and best are hidden, for faithful reasons. And we do some pretty good things that are not hidden. We give some pretty strong support to the Interfaith Shelter, especially for a church our size. They do not leave people where they find them, but nurture and help them into jobs and better lives. That is wonderful! They do not have any overt connection to Jesus. Some of us believe that Jesus is key to healing and New Life. In a world so full of need and with our limited resources, can we afford to support what does not carry our truth, our best power for healing? Well, until we find our own true mission,

at least this is something. And for those of you with short memories, it was in fact my leadership and perspective that moved our contributions to the Interfaith Shelter from a few hundred dollars to the thousands we have been giving for a number of years now. I am not blowing my own horn; it is your money and response to our appeals that make this possible.

Ditto to our support of the Marshallese Congregation. I was the one who stopped the movement to get them entirely out of our facility so we would no longer have to care about them or be inconvenienced by them. Instead we began to support them with more and more money, advocacy in the Conference, and personal encouragement where it seemed appropriate. The Marshallese Congregation grows stronger all the time. In this case, we do not have the concern that Jesus is never mentioned or that His power and healing are being left out of the equation. Most of you would be appalled at their theology, if you knew anything about it. But they love Jesus a lot, and a lot more than most UCC congregations. I think that is worth far more than all the inconvenience they cause us.

Our problems, choices, and opportunities come in endless new guises. But they are never as new as we like to imagine. When Jesus walked in Jerusalem two thousand years ago, the generic do-gooding approaches were already in place – run and operated from the temple by the priests. People gave alms for the poor, and the priests distributed them. There was, as in all ages, an “establishment” of the poor in various places in the temple vicinity, waiting for and living off the handouts. Some of these people had no other means of survival. Some of them just found it easier than working for a living. Jesus healed one of this second kind of beggar, incurring his lasting animosity. (John 5:2-18) For the most part, this temple service, like so many efforts in our own time, left people as they found them: providing sustenance enough to keep them alive, but doing nothing to move them into a New Life.

I have noticed (though some people seem to despise me for it) that Jesus had no faith in the temple system or its approach. He designed a very different mission and ministry and ended up bypassing the temple and all of its efforts to help people. He changed lives everywhere He went. But not in, from, or through the temple. If we are followers of Jesus, why have we gone back to a way that He so clearly rejected?

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Loving your neighbor is one of the most powerful and appealing precepts in all of life. Nobody has to talk most of us into it. We want to be, long to be, and dream of being good at it – and doing it more and more. But there are serious problems with how and who and what ways we can design to support and cooperate with each other in such efforts. To do anything that matters beyond what we are already doing requires – demands – both vision and more resources. We will not get either until we agree that it is truly important to us, and that doing it the way we are doing it is not enough.

Any “way of life” that is willing to leave things or people the way they are is hopeless. Look around. Yet there is huge resistance to change, increasing exponentially as it gets closer to “home” – closer to how and where we live; closer to our own lives and how we go about them.

Any program or movement that promises to improve the world – improve those around us – without making any serious changes in us has wide appeal. It may even become wildly successful for a while. But in the end, it will make no significant difference and it will be short-lived.

I still think Jesus is our only hope – our only serious, long-range, genuine, and lasting hope. But we have divorced Him – His presence, His guidance, His leadership – from many of the organizations and institutions that use His name but no longer carry His Message. They try to turn His promises and invitations into safe and bland ways that leave things and people the same as they were before.

When “love your neighbor” has no power to lift or redeem those we claim to love, something has gone terribly wrong. When people get so busy “helping others” that they neglect their own families and their own spiritual pilgrimage, something has gone terribly wrong. Nowhere in the history of the world have we ever been able to make a significant change for others if we were not in the middle of a significant change ourselves.

Jesus never ever left or leaves anybody the same – not before, during, or after conversion. The journey, the pilgrimage – THE WAY – is too long, too exciting, too high, and too important.