



TRINITY EPISCOPAL CHURCH

on the Branford Green

May you find Christ, Community and Compassion within these historic walls.

All Kinds of Love

By The Rev. Sharon Gracen

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The math of Advent adds together hope, peace and joy and arrives at the sum of love. It is the greatest of all things as the Letter to the Corinthians states. The First Letter of John proclaims that God and love are synonymous. Love is the impetus behind the incarnation which brings the presence of the holy into the confused collective of humankind. It is the mission and the syllabus, the goal and the path at the same time.

Love is the perpetual gift of God which will be offered again and again until we finally recognize it and accept it. Advent has been and is about being prepared for love. First we have to believe that we are lovable. And then we have to know how to see it around us.

The New Testament was written in Greek which has up to seven different words that we lump together and translate as love. There are four terms that we are probably not familiar with at all. First is *philautia* which is self-love, both the unhealthy narcissistic kind and the kind that helps us to believe in ourselves and expand our own capacity for love. The second is *ludus* and it is playful. It can be flirtation, laughing with or teasing your friends. The third is *pragma*, the love that develops over a long time that you see in couples who have good marriages after 50 years. *Pragma* understands compromise and patience. I like knowing that being pragmatic has its roots in love. The fourth is *storge* which is the love between parents and children, leaders for their communities, love within a community. *Storge* and the other three love words are not used in the Bible but the *storge* kind of love is present throughout both Testaments.

And then, the three Greek words that we do know - *eros*, *phillios* and *agape*. *Eros* is passionate and physical and the Greeks were leery of it because it causes one to lose control - to be "head over heels." The word is not in the Bible, but it is clearly there in the Song of Songs and in David's seduction of Bathsheba.

The city of Philadelphia, the city of brotherly love, gets its name from the next kind of love, *phillios*. It is deep friendship, informed by loyalty, understanding, shared experiences and emotions. The Greeks highly valued this type of friendship love.

The last and most exalted form of love is *agape*. It is the love within which God in Christ holds the world. It is unconditional and cannot be affected by what we do - God loves us - without reservation and without limits. It is often translated into English as charity - something given with no expectation of return.

1100 Main Street, Branford, CT 06405

www.trinitybranford.org

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Here is one of the best descriptions of Agape love that I have even found. It is from a Chris Legg, Baptist pastor and counselor in Texas. "Agape love is entirely about the lover, and has nothing whatsoever to do with the one who is loved. Agape love, in its purest form, requires no payment or favor in response. The most common word for God's love for us is Agape (I John, John 3:16) and the love we are commanded to have for one another (Matt. 5:44, I Cor. 13). This lack of input from the recipient makes it possible for us to love our enemies even though we may not like them or the situation they have put us in – because Agape love is not in any way dependent on circumstances; it says "I love you because I choose/commit to." Unlike eros or philos, Agape creates a straight line that neither fades or grows (!) in its perfect form (which of course only exists from God outward) Oddly enough, even though many people marry out of eros love alone, they make vows that speak of commitment despite any circumstance: richer/poorer, better/worse, sickness/health. This kind of love is about a commitment to the very best for another, no matter what emotions or feelings exist!... It is a love freely given, and freely committed to."

Agape is the pinnacle of love - the sum of all kinds of love. It is the way all of the other types of love can be expressed. It is the love of 1 Corinthians, patient, kind, not looking to win, it just is. It is the hardest love to emulate. In the end of the Gospel of John, Jesus uses the word agape in the commandment to love one another as he loves us. Later, after Jesus resurrection, he asks Peter, "Do you love me (agape)?" Peter answers him, "you know I love you (philius)." Even in the presence of the resurrected embodiment of agape love, Peter can't get there. Jesus asks him again with the same result and then finally gives in and asks him only of philius. Perhaps he realizes that it will take a while for Peter and the rest of humanity to understand the kind of love that we are called to give.

A woman priest with whom I worked before my ordination told a story from her life as a nurse in an emergency depart of a large hospital. She remembered the staff being unnerved when a man was brought in. He had murdered his family with a knife and then tried to kill himself. He was covered with blood, theirs and his, particularly his hands. He had been tended, stitched up and bandaged while blood poured into his body in transfusion but unless there was a particular task to accomplish, no one wanted to be in with him. And then something happened. An orderly went to the man's bedside with a basin of warm water and a wash cloth and carefully washed the blood of children and wife off of his hands. It was a profound moment of agape that he chose to give, regardless of what the man had done he was treated as if he were also loved by God. The staff that witnessed the scene was moved and reminded. To me, it has always been a Christ story. We are the broken violent ones; Christ the one washing the stains off of our hands, loving us in spite of ourselves.

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So this story of ultimate love begins with a surprise visit to Mary. It's good to remember that love doesn't necessarily make things easy. Mary stepped courageously into the divine story and offered the hospitality of her body, her life and her heart. Later Jesus would turn to people and say "follow me" but I think that we would do well to live as if she had said it, too. On this fourth Sunday of Advent, we are invited to surrender ourselves to the love that will come down on Christmas and every day. And not just surrender to it, but to allow ourselves to be changed by it. That's where our Advent journey ends and love takes over. May it be with us, according to your will.

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