



TRINITY EPISCOPAL CHURCH

on the Branford Green

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

Blah, blah, blah, Love

By The Rev. Sharon Gracen

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Jim Lemler is the Rector of Christ Church in Greenwich. But he used to be the Dean of the seminary I attended. It was his job to preach at the Dean's Mass every Tuesday. One Monday night at dinner he commented that he needed to spend the evening preparing his sermon and he wasn't sure what he was going to say. One of his daughters rolled her eyes and said, "I know what you'll preach...blah blah blah love; blah blah blah love!" Sometimes the readings assigned for a Sunday or even a couple of Sundays in a row just kind of do that to a preacher. And here we are in the midst of Paul writing about love...blah blah. In a good way!

Last week's portion of the letter to the church in Rome began, "let love be genuine.." and this week, "owe no one anything, except to love one another.." It is good for us to contemplate what that means.

The letter to the Romans was written toward the end of Paul's life – a life that ended in martyrdom. In this letter he brought together his thoughts and wisdom from a career of planting and nurturing churches and teaching people about Christ. Throughout that career, Paul tried to explain to people what love is and what it is not. He tried to describe, explain its effect and at times, he demanded it – because he understood that Jesus was love in human form and that as the church we have become the extension of that. One cannot be a Christian without love.

But throughout his time in churches in Corinth, Philippi, Thessalonica, and other places he must have felt that he was writing and preaching blah blah love because people often didn't understand what he was saying. Paul was raised a Jew and steeped in the Hebrew tradition and scriptures. He knew the different ways that God and God's people and love are intertwined. In Hebrew, there are two words for love *hesed* and *ahab*. *Hesed* is God's love for us, is often translated as "steadfast love." It denotes kindness and mercy – the kind of kindness that is bestowed by one who is elevated on one who is not. It is benevolent, freely bestowed where there is no requirement for it. *Hesed* is a love between those who are not alike. God shows *hesed* by loving all of creation, which is different from the divine being. We are called to practice this kind of love but the word usually used for love between people and the people's love for God is *ahab* or *Ahab* – I'm not sure what Melville was up to with his Captain named "love." The interesting thing about the word *ahab* is that it has the same root as the word "to give." Loving and giving cannot be disentangled. Love motivates giving and love expects giving. For love to be its greatest expression it should bring together these two concepts of love – *hesed* and *ahab* so that the love of that which is different and the love of that which is alike become one love. Sounds like a Bob Marley song.

But Paul did not did not write to his churches in Hebrew, he wrote in Greek which gave him the language to define love in a new way. In Greek there are four words – *storge*, *eros*, *philia*, and *agape*. All words with subtle distinctions. *Storge* is affection, often within a family; *eros*, is physical and intimate love – these two are not found in the Bible). The New Testament writers focused on *philia* which is a virtuous friendship; and *agape* which is unconditional and sacrificial love. Interestingly, when Jesus asks Peter three times, "do you love me?" he says *agape*, *agape*, *philia*. Unconditional must inform and expand friendships into a love for all.

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During Paul's time, the people of the Greek speaking world understood who deserved which kind of love. But the troublemaking apostle threw out those limits and said that everyone deserves the highest form of love. In Christ, all are elevated to the same status of beloved of God. Paul rewrote the understanding of marital love – which in the Greek world would never have been described as the virtuous friendship of *philia* and certainly never *agape*. In this new understanding of love, slaves and masters stand as equals. Citizens and immigrants belong equally in God's kingdom of love. Paul stood in front of his congregations and said, "everything you ever thought you knew about love, doesn't go far enough. Christ has opened the door onto a new world built on extravagant love for all. Too many Christians have probably only heard, "blah, blah...."

The genuine love of last week's reading is the real challenge for us in the church. It is more profound than niceness, or just getting along; it finds its expression in this morning's Gospel reading. What do you do when you are not feeling the love? Genuine love impels you to go and work it out and find a new way to be. Genuine love is not content with complaining but doing nothing about a situation, or staying angry, or holding grudges. It does not store up animosity and wait to get even. Genuine love is spiritual maturity and it takes responsibility within a community. And it is the only way that today's well-beloved passage – "whenever two or three are gathered together, I will be in the midst of them" makes any sense. This is meant to be understood as how we live together with our differences and disagreements.

Now I want to tell you how this all worked at Trinity this week. First we had the meeting of the Worship Ministry on Tuesday night – the power came on so we came together. Everyone had been invited to come and help assess how we have worshipped together since I got here a year ago. It was an invitation to bring likes and dislikes, share concerns, and express the ways in which how we have been worshipping has landed in you. In spite of the difficulties after Irene, we had nearly 20 people in attendance. There were open ears to listen to each other, open hearts so we could hear each other. It was genuine love in action. It was *hesed* and *ahab*, *philia* and *agape*. We will be doing it again soon.

There is a Facebook page that shows up on my page regularly called Unapologetically Episcopalian. I love it because it lifts up all that is truly fine about our denomination. On Wednesday I saw a question posted about whether our churches had been a help before and after Irene or were we in need of help ourselves. It stopped me in my tracks. We were fine here but the only help we had given was to our insurance company by not needing to file any claims. I mentioned this at the Wednesday Healing Eucharist and the small group there came up with the idea of holding a community dinner to help those still in need. From 1 PM on Wednesday to 6 PM Thursday – the best kind of loving and giving happened. A small team headed out to ask for donations; they came back with an outpouring of generosity. Members of the congregation showed up and said "put me to work!" And then at 6:00 people came to be fed. There were exhausted families with young children, seniors living on their own in the dark, people really tired of cooking on the grill and others who just needed to come to where folks were gathered. We put spaghetti and salad on their plates but what we really served up was love. It was genuine love that wanted nothing in return and that made no distinctions between people. It was *hesed* and *ahab*, *philia* and *agape*. It was beautiful.

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