

Agape

by Rev. Joe Connolly

“Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things and has the power to endure all things. Love never ends.” — 1 Corinthians 13:7-8a

Some of you know this. My bet is not everyone knows this. I am currently a member of the Board of the New York Conference of the United Church of Christ. No—the Board does not have a fancier name than that. It’s simply the Board.

As to my participation on Boards with the Denomination, a long time ago I traveled to Cleveland a number of times in the course of two years and participated in an ad hoc Board with the Church at the National Level. It was formed to examine a specific issue. But my current commitments in our denomination are with the Susquehanna Association and the New York Conference.

The Association commitments— three Boards, the Committee on Authorized Ministry, the General Ministry Team and the Unified Fitness Review Board— take up more time than my duties with the Conference Board. But in this coming week I will execute one of those duties with that Board.

Now that the fiscal year is completed and accounting done, as a member of the Board I shall be writing a number of thank you notes to churches who contributed funds to the Conference. Those funds used to be called O.C.W.M.— Our Churches Wider Mission. They are now called L.C.B.S.— Local Church Basic Support. We in the United Church of Christ like to abbreviate all of these names.

Either way the money represents what each church voluntarily gives to the Conference, a portion of which is passed on to the Church at the National Level. Perhaps key questions here are why should local Churches voluntarily give money to the Conference? And why would a member of the Board, as opposed to the Conference Minister for instance, be sending out those kinds of missives? (Slight pause.)

For a moment let me take you back to what happened at my first formal Board meeting. We were privileged to have the General Counsel of the National Church offer a two hour course in the ethical standards expected not just of church boards but of all non-profit boards.

One of the things which stuck in my brain was the discussion of a specific ethical standard. As is true of many non-profit boards, members of the Conference Board come from specific segments of a broad constituency. In this case Board members come from all our Associations across the Conference. And in my case, I am from the Susquehanna Association.

However, once on a Board the ethical standard for any non-profit but especially churches, says the origin of a constituency, that specific affiliation, is a moot point. As a Board member any individual member is now responsible to represent the whole.

In short, I am there to represent not just the Susquehanna Association, not just this church, but the whole Conference, from churches on Long Island to churches in Manhattan, to churches on the St. Lawrence Seaway, to churches in the Rochester area to churches in the Buffalo area to churches in the Jamestown area. I am there to represent churches large and to represent churches small. Again, to represent the whole is an ethical standard. (Slight pause.)

These words are found in 1 Corinthians: “Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things and has the

power to endure all things. Love never ends.” (Slight pause.)

As was mentioned when this reading was introduced, there are six words in Greek for love. We speakers of English are confined to one word.

Here is the list of those Greek words with a brief explanation of each. *Eros*, a physical expression of love; *Philia*, friendship sometimes referred to as brotherly or sisterly love; *Ludus*, playful love; *Pragma*, longstanding love; *Philautia*, love of self and to be clear we are not talking about a positive reference as refers to vanity as opposed to a protective love of self.

Last we have *Agape*. *Agape* is unconditional, altruistic, universal, inclusive love.

It is fairly well known that, in this passage, Paul addresses *Agape*. I would also say when we gather around the table as we did this morning, we are directly addressing *Agape* love, unconditional, altruistic, universal, inclusive love.

And yes, as a community we should be aware we need to have a special affinity for one another. As a community we need to be aware we are bonded in and by *Agape* love for one another.

But the very meaning of the word should also instruct us about the greater impact, the effect of *Agape* love. *Agape* love should not and does not end in this place with those gathered around the table. *Agape* love should not and does not end with those here gathered.

The very meaning of the word should instruct us that, having bonded here in this place at this time around *that* table, this unconditional, altruistic, universal, inclusive love needs to move beyond this place, this time, *that* table. [The pastor has pointed to the Communion table in this worship space.] Indeed, the very symbol of *the* table, the sharing of a meal, speaks to the human universality of Paul’s intent. The tactile experience of the cup and the bread, the reality of that, should speak to us about the meaning of *Agape* love. (Slight pause.)

Earlier in this service it was wonderful to receive new members into our Congregation. In the ceremony we pray that (quote:), “Together may we live in the Spirit, binding one another up in love, sharing in the life and worship of the church... and serving the world....”— the world. (Slight pause.)

That brings me back to my service in the Susquehanna Association and the New York Conference. You may not be aware of this. In terms of our polity each member of this church is a member of the Susquehanna Association. Each member of this church is a member of the New York Conference.

In fact, the positions I hold on these boards are not meant solely for members of the clergy. They all have members of the laity serving on them. The last member of the laity to serve on the New York Conference Board was the late Ron Herrett. And I think I’m not wrong about this for those of you who remember Don Burr I believe he also served on the New York Conference Board.

So, your *Agape* love, your unconditional, altruistic, universal, inclusive love does not end with this church. *Agape* love, your unconditional, altruistic, universal, inclusive love extends— it extends to our Conference, our Association. Indeed, our collective responsibility— all of us, not just the pastor— our collective responsibility to the Association and to the Conference is an outgrowth of the universality of *Agape* love.

But there is more. *Agape* love invites us to see all humanity— not just Christians, all humanity— with the eyes of another of those Greek words for love— *Philia*, love for all our brothers and sisters. In fact, *Philia* goes

beyond love for brothers and sisters. *Philia* is about love for all God's creation. (Slight pause.)

I need to add one thing. We Christians have yet another name for *Agape*. We call it covenant love. And covenant love is in many ways demanding.

What covenant love demands of us is growth. Covenant love demands learning. Covenant love demands that we see new horizons constantly, that we remember the past but leave it in the past. Perhaps most importantly covenant love demands that we hold one another's humanity and well being as precious. (Slight pause.)

We all know and can probably recite by heart Paul's words. (Quote:) "Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things and has the power to endure all things. Love never ends." The challenge for us is can we meet that standard? Amen.

02/03/2019

United Church of Christ, First Congregational, Norwich, NY

ENDPIECE: It is the practice of the Pastor to speak after the Closing Hymn, but before the Choral Response and Benediction. This is an précis of what was said: "You may have heard it said we need faith, hope and charity and the Bible tells us that. But the Bible does not tell us that. *Agape* translates into Latin as *Caritas*. *Caritas* was then translated into the Anglo-Saxon language tree as charity. But when that translation happened it still meant *Agape*, unconditional, altruistic, universal, inclusive love. It did not mean charity, giving something to someone in need. And as I may have just illustrated Paul's challenge to us in using the word *Agape* is much more demanding than charity."

BENEDICTION: Let us, above all, surround ourselves with the perfect love of God, a love which binds everything together in harmony. And may we love God so much, that we love nothing else too much. May we be so in awe of God, that we are in awe of no one else and nothing else. Amen.