

Love in the Time of COVID, 4: Divine Love

Michael Jenkins

Romans 8:35-39

July 26, 2020 | St. Charles Avenue Presbyterian Church

Agape is the word for divine love in the New Testament. It's the kind of love spoken of when theologians describe God as an ever-flowing stream of self-giving life and love. It is the kind of love that suffuses Dante's "Paradise." Unconditional love. Unmerited love. Unlimited love. Eternal love. Gracious, merciful, all-forgiving love. Stratospheric, universal, beyond all boundaries, beyond all knowledge and wisdom and any power under heaven, love.

Most sermons on this kind of love leave me wanting it, hoping for it, wishing I had it, wishing I could share it, but unable to scale the heights. Flat-footed, I stand on the ground looking up as far as I can see, but still I can't bring such love into focus.

But that doesn't mean that divine love isn't a present reality. And it doesn't mean it can't happen on earth, to people like us. Let me tell you a story about what I think agape love, divine love looks like.

The first time Debbie and I met Bill and Betty was at lunch in their hometown at their favorite little restaurant. They were both in their nineties already then, and we knew them until they died seven years later.

Now, I could talk about their love for each other. I don't think I've ever seen such enduring affection in a couple in my life. They married before Bill went off to serve in World War II. He was in Patton's Third Army and was one of the men who marched day and night in the dead of winter from one pitched battle to another to liberate Bastogne in the Battle of the Bulge. When Bill returned to the United States, he and Betty raised a wonderful family, as he and his brother built a chain of car dealerships that are still run by their children and grandchildren.

Bill insisted on holding the restaurant door for Betty and Debbie, ushering me ahead of him in his courtly manner. I don't mind telling you at all, he became for me a hero and a role model. But, it's not about Bill that I'm telling this story. And it's not about the love between this man and this woman. It is about Betty and the way divine love so filled her that you couldn't stop it, even when she was physically falling apart.

Some years after our first visit with Bill and Betty we drove out to see them one day. Bill and Debbie and I had lunch with one of his sons. Then Bill offered to drive us over to see Betty.

(Parenthetically, I shall tell you that this was arguably the most terrifying experience Debbie and I ever had in a car. And we've driven across the Cairngorm Mountains of Scotland in a blizzard! Bill's eyesight wasn't nearly as good as it once had been, back when he was only 95 or 96. He took us down the wrong way on one way streets, pulled out in front of an eighteen

wheeler bearing down without mercy, and ran off the road into deep ditches. All the while he was talking to us, telling us that Betty spent every day now in a great program for other older adults with various forms of dementia down at the community center. It was a sort of community-wide Aden Program.)

By this point, Betty was suffering from profound dementia. As Debbie and I entered the center with Bill, we spotted her beautiful face which still lit up at seeing Bill. They hugged as though it had been years since seeing one another, although Bill had dropped her off at the center only a couple of hours before. She “met” us, then was “reminded” by Bill that she knew us well. Her warm sweet smile never faltered. But, none of this, mind you, is about divine love. We’re just getting to that.

Community center lemonade was on offer, and we each received a cup of it. Across the table from Betty sat a man, to whom Bill introduced us. He also suffered from dementia, I suspect farther along than Betty’s. He was hunched over a cup of coffee from which steam no longer rose. Looking up at me, with a sort of expectant smile, he asked, “Did you know my sister, Margaret?”

I said, “No sir, I never had that pleasure.”

His smile faded quickly to nothing. He looked back down at his cup of coffee.

Bill and Betty chatted. Bill reminded Betty of other visits we had enjoyed with them. They talked about their children, grandchildren, and great grandchildren.

After a few minutes, the man looked up from his coffee again, this time at Debbie, the same smile on his face. He asked Debbie, “Did you know my sister, Margaret?”

“No, I’m sorry. I never got to know Margaret,” Debbie said patiently with a soft smile.

Again, his smile faded as he looked down at his cold coffee.

Bill and Debbie and I were talking with Betty, then, for several minutes. Betty listened with obvious delight to stories the three of us were telling. We all laughed. But, though her smile communicated, “I’m with you,” there was no disguising the vacant look in her eyes. She was at sea, lost in the conversation, her only anchor Bill.

There was a pause in the conversation, when, once again, the man with his coffee looked up again at me, and said with that smile, “Did you know my sister, Margaret?”

But before I could say a word, Betty reached her hand across the table and gently placed it on the man’s hand, and she said, “I remember Margaret.” She and the man just sat there smiling at each other for a long moment.

The Reformed theologian, Emil Brunner, believed that the image of God in humanity is not some metaphysical construct, but is love, divine love, agape, unconditional, unmerited, unlimited. Some other theologians dismissed him. They argued for more sophisticated ideas.

But Brunner knew that if God is love, and God made us in his image, we have received an indelible stamp of who God is. And God is love. I think Brunner was right. And there's no need to ascend to the highest heaven to see it.

This love, *agape*, is the grandeur of God, as Gerard Manley Hopkins writes, the grandeur of God with which the "world is charged." "It will flame out, like shining from shook foil. It gathers to greatness," not only in streams of transcendent light, but in a moment when an elderly woman racked by dementia remembers or says she remembers a name of a loved one feared lost to memory, and speaks that name again to one who fears he is left alone in the world.

Divine love touches the earth in a thousand disguises, but incarnated as it is, always it is divine.

Amen.