

“Love Must Also Be Tough”

In the thirteenth chapter of his First Letter to the Church at Corinth, Saint Paul provides us with a sublime description of love and its workings. It is important that we recognize up front that Paul, throughout this chapter, employs the Greek word, ἀγάπη (agapay)

As I shared with the Bible Class last Sunday (and yes, that was blatant plug for that class!), the Greeks had four words that they used which are translated as love into English.

We have sort of transliterated ἐρως into “erotic,” with all of its connotations of sexuality. But ἐρως is not so much sexual as it is sensual; it has to do with how we process the world through the gifts, the senses, God has given us. Ἔρως (eros) is the word that we would use to say “*I love chocolate chip cookie dough ice cream.*” All love begins as ἐρως . . . but when it comes to other people, it needs to move on, lest we turn people into objects to be used.

Φιλία (philia) is best translated as “friendship love” (we tend to say “brotherly love” because we have a city name Philadelphia, which means “brotherly love” because the Greek word ἀδελφία (adelfia) for “brother” was added to it. Because the Greeks tended to use it to describe male-to-male relationships, it has entered our language through such words as philanthropy and philanderer.

A unique word is the word στοργή (storgé); it describes the rough-and-tumble love we find in families. It describes the reality that I would kick down a door to get at my sisters when their teasing went over the top (which I did on more than one occasion), but I would step in immediately if our neighbor, Robbie Williams, ever tried to hit one of them.

And then this word used by Saint Paul: ἀγάπη (agapay).

I won’t recite all of Paul’s descriptors of what love is all about — just a

few: *“patient . . . kind . . . not envious, boastful, arrogant or rude . . . does not insist on its own way . . . not irritable or resentful . . . doesn’t rejoice in wrongdoing, rejoices in the truth.”* Now, we could run down each of these modifiers and explore in some depth what each one means . . . I guess I mean “I could” (but relax; that’s not what I’m going to do). I’m not going to do that because it seems to me that Paul left out one modifier that really ought to be there (I do recognize that, in saying that, I am dangerously close to questioning the inspiration of this part of the Bible; but bear with me a bit). In addition to “patient . . . kind” and all the rest, it seems to me that “Love Must Also Be Tough”

There is a concept that comes out of the realm of the treatment of persons who abuse drugs and alcohol that bears the title “Tough Love.” Parents of youth who abuse substances are taught that they need to exercise “tough love:” kick the kid out of the house . . . cut off the supply of money and all other kinds of support. The goal is to force that abuser into recognizing his or her problem and to live with the consequences of choices made, while at the same time establishing very strict boundaries so that the abusive behavior does not spill over as a toxic destructive force to the rest of the family. This kind of “tough love” is intended to cut through the frequent co-dependency structures that families erect to deny the problem exists or to dismiss the severity of it. Such “tough love” often makes sense in dealing with addictive behavior; it is also very hard to pull off.

But I’m not talking today about that kind of “tough love.” No, when I say that “Love must also be tough.” I am saying a couple of things. On one level, loving is just plain, hard work. President George W. Bush got not a few brickbats in one of his addresses (it may well have been his first “State of the Union Address”) when he referred to the tasks of the presidency and more than once voiced the complaint: *“It’s hard work!”* Several pundits said, in effect, *“Get over it, Dubya. You wanted to job; you got it. Just do what you’re supposed to do and shut up about it.”*

Now, I am well aware that there are any number of songs out there that

proclaim, “*You’re so easy to love,*” and to that I respond: “*Bunk!*” Loving someone requires energy, attention, focus, decision, action, and follow-through. Another way to say that is this: Love doesn’t just “happen.” This is one of the great myths that our culture has erected around the notion of romantic love. Movie after novel after TV special after song lyric would tell us that there is this magical “something” that happens “across a crowded room” that blooms full-blown into undying and rip-roaring love. Actually, if truth be told, that is a more accurate description of lust: “She” walks into the room and my glands start to secrete, my pupils dilate, my respiration and heart rate elevate, and I call it “love” — “*I’m in love.*” No, at that moment I am in lust — that’s ερος kicking in again: there is nothing inherently wrong with it (as long as I don’t act on those impulses).

Real love — αγαπη love — goes much deeper than the glandular level; it moves even past the cerebral level. Real love demand commitment, not just feelings. Paul gets at that when he describes love as “patient.” The word he uses is μακροθυμια (makrothumia); the King James Version translated that as “long-suffering.” Accent the “long” part of that, and you begin to see that love must have the quality that enables us to “hang in there.”

This is one of things that makes love tough: other people do stupid, hurtful, inconsiderate, and just plain nasty stuff. We are called to love them, not just when they are witty and bright, benevolent and caring, attentive to our needs, and gentle and kind, but when they act like jerks. Consider the assembly in the Nazareth synagogue in today’s Gospel who become so irate that Jesus should even begin to suggest that some Sidonian widow was “better” or “more worthy of God’s favor” than a Jewish widow, so irate that they were ready to stone Him. Think Jesus loved them? You bet! That’s tough! “*It’s hard work.*”

And it’s made the harder for us by the fact that we are often as jerky, if not more so, than the jerks we say we want to love. Admit it; it’s true. And in the recesses of your being you know it’s true. Self-centeredness,

prejudices, judgmental attitudes, preconceptions, any number of “-isms” — these and more are at work in each of us, and they make the task of loving that much harder.

“Hold on, Pastor. Did you just say ‘the task of loving’? Could you explain that a bit?” You actually have had to put up with me on this before, but you may not remember, and it’s very important to remember.

We have been inculcated with the notion that love is a feeling. It is not; love is a behavior, or more precisely, a series of behaviors. Now, some behaviors are autonomic: your eye blinks many times per minute; it also blinks quite pronouncedly when something appears as if it will invade the eye (say, a “Three-Stooges-two-finger-eye-pop” *“Nyuk, nyuk, nyuk!”*). Some behaviors are the result of pattern memory: You get into, start up, and move out in your automobile without much thought to what you are doing (although actually there’s quite a bit of information flowing up and down, back and forth in your neural networks).

Love is nothing of either of those; love is an act of the will. Love requires thought and then that thought must give rise to action. It is not enough for me to think: *“I’ll bet that Kristine would really appreciate it if I totally cleaned up our bedroom.”* I happen to know that she would be thrilled by that. If I then make the willful choice to go golfing instead, where’s the love? Oh sure, I could content myself with the notion that I *“had a good thought.”* (Raspberry!) but there would not be love in that.

Love takes us outside ourselves and positions us squarely toward the other. Because our sinful impulse always wants “Me” to be “Numero Uno” it takes effort to love; effort to overcome our self-centered proclivities; effort to rise to action toward someone who, at that given moment, you may not even like. “Liking” is a feeling; “loving” is an act of willing to step toward that unlikable person simply because you know that God wants you to love her, help him.

Mother Teresa wrote in her book, [A Simple Path](#):

“People are unreasonable, illogical and self-centered. Love, anyway.”

If you do good, people will accuse you of selfish, ulterior motives. Do good, anyway.

If you are successful, you will win false friends and true enemies. Succeed, anyway.

The good you do today will be forgotten tomorrow. Do good, anyway.

Honesty and frankness make you vulnerable. Be honest and frank, anyway.

The biggest person with the biggest ideas can be shot down by the smallest person with the smallest mind. Think big, anyway.

What you spend years building may be destroyed overnight. Build, anyway.

People really need help but may attack if you help them. Help, anyway.

Give the world the best you have and you might get kicked in the teeth. Give the world the best you've got, anyway."

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That's tough . . . but then: "Love Must Also Be Tough."

Amen.