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| <i>Date Preached</i> | 02-May | <i>Date Initiated</i> | 12-Apr |
| <i>Where Preached</i> | SAK | <i>Appointed Readings</i> | Easter 5, Yr B |

" I am the vine, you are the branches.
Those who abide in me, and I in them, **bear much fruit.** "



On Easter Day, I preached that one of the joyous and transformational consequences of Jesus' Resurrection was ... and is ... the 'Heaven-ing' of earth: the fact that we begin dwelling in Paradise at the moment of our baptism, rather than waiting until our bodily death. And there is no New Testament author quite like the author of the three letters of John* to paint a verbal image of this Heaven-on-earth:

- "No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God lives in us, and God's love is *perfected* in us."
- "God is love, and those who abide in love ↓ abide in God, ↓ and God abides in them."

If the quintessence of Heaven—of our living in and of God—is complete and mutual love, then John (let's call him, for convenience) certainly preaches Heaven's presence and practice now, this side of the mortal veil.

In fact, John goes so far as to identify God *as* love: "God is ἀγάπη"; that is, God *is* total, unconditional self-sacrificing love. And John's word-choice is significant, for Greek had many words for LOVE. God is not στοργή, the instinctual love family members usually have for one another. God is not φιλία, the love between close friends. Nor is God ἔρως, the intimate, even passionate love between two people who have fallen deeply for one another. While all three of those types of love—kinship, deep friendship, soulmating—do help describe aspects of God's relationship with us, through Christ ... it is only ἀγάπη—all-embracing, all-encompassing, all-consuming love—that can fully name God's existence; God's *raison d'être*, if we may say so: to love every being, in every way, in every place and every time.

And ... if, as He says in today's gospel reading, Jesus is the vine that God the Father has grown and we are the branches of the Jesus-vine, then our highest—perhaps our singular—Christian calling is to bear the fruit of that vine: showing unconditional love for as many as possible, in as many ways as possible, whatsoever the cost. Just as the 'mission' of the branches of a grapevine is to produce clusters of grapes, so ours, as the branches of an ἀγάπη-vine is to produce a bumper crop of ἀγάπη—of self-sacrificing, other-uplifting love.

And yet, we tend to honor this mission more in aspiration than actuality. We are more inclined to save for a rainy day than spend lavishly on those in need. When we see people suffering hunger or homelessness, we often can't help but wonder—just a *little bit*—how they helped bring this on themselves. We may be willing to name the injustice or unfairness inflicted upon others, but

* The current scholarly consensus is that while the three 'Johannine' epistles follow the style and thinking of the Gospel according to John, they were not written by John the Evangelist (who, by the way, is someone other than John the Apostle).

we flinch from *repairing* it. As branches of the Jesus-vine, the nourishing spirit of ἀγάπη courses through our beings. But because it lives in the dry, barren soil of our humanity, the fruit we produce is often shriveled and sour.

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Why is this? How is it that we live in the Heaven-of-Easter ... in the ongoing ἀγάπη of the Resurrection ... but seem unresponsive to its generous love? live in the infinite abundance of eternal life ... but seem dead to its joyful giving? I might posit several hypotheses,[†] but during a recent discussion on racism and racial reconciliation, a local colleague in ministry summed it up succinctly: "We have to remember," he said: "LOVE is a verb, not a feeling."

Geoff was, I believe, taking issue with a very common problem of our time. In our hyper-emotional, over-individualized culture, the ἔρωσ sense of LOVE—LOVE as a warm feeling we have for another, which we wait (and hope) to be reciprocated—tends to be our sole conception of LOVE. Now, ἔρωσ—our closest, most intimate human relationship—can be transformational; it can be the Godliest form of love two human beings ever experience. But the drawback, if not the danger, in understanding *all* love through the lens of ἔρωσ lies romantic love's very preciousness. Because ἔρωσ love is so intimate and thus leaves us so vulnerable, ἔρωσ protects us by making inquiries and setting boundaries. What am I feeling? How strongly? Is this mutual? Should I risk taking a further step? To experience the God-given thrill and sustenance of ἔρωσ love without becoming its victim, we must discern when and how and to whom we should give it.

Ἀγάπη, however, is a love not of discerning, but of *acting*: a love of unbounded generosity and unconditional sacrifice, repeated over and over and over again.

- It is the love of Christ on the Cross, so that there might also be a Resurrection ... and the love of our seeing an entire segment of the human population exploited and held down and resolving that things *must* change.
- It is the love of Jesus giving us the sacraments so that we may feed upon Him again and again ... and the love that, when confronted by others' hunger or privation, says, "What can I do, right *now*?"
- It is the love of God emptying Godself to become human ... and the love of our giving until it hurts.

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A branch grows the fruit of its vine involuntarily ... biologically. It doesn't grow the fruit that rests at the core of its DNA only if it feels like ... or thinks the timing is right ... or believes the world *deserves* free grapes. No, the branch simply *acts* ... the way its Creator intended it to. Likewise, ἀγάπη love doesn't tote up the cost, weigh public opinion or wait for a more convenient

[†] *E.g.*, our insularity (not putting ourselves 'out there' enough); our sense that we own, rather than merely steward, the goods of this world; our heeding a morality (which, we convince ourselves, is of divine origin) that judges some worthy of love and others not—a morality that ignores the fact that love is not always supportive and affirming, but can also teach, reprove, correct and even punish; our fear of rejection (think of the potential public humiliation Philip faced as he ran alongside that chariot!); and our thinking we do not know how ... are not sufficiently equipped ... to give others the love they need, which is sometimes a sign of our own feeling un- (or ill-) loved and/or unworthy.

time. For ἀγάπη springs from the heart—an almost *involuntary* sacrifice to address the condition of another.

When Jesus says that He is the vine and we are the branches—all stemming from the ἀγάπη Who is God, Jesus calls us to *live out* the love of Easter Heaven: the love of our having been unconditionally chosen and undeservedly saved. As the branches of the Jesus-vine, we have ἀγάπη love coursing and flowing, like sap, through our veins, in an overflowing supply. This love-sap gives us everything we need to produce giant clusters of love for the world ... to reveal the true Heaven of this world to everyone blinded by one of its myriad hells. All we need to do is develop a wider, more divine conception of what Christian love actually is: not thinking, but acting; not assessing risks, but only recognizing opportunities; not exercising will, but instead allowing what God has already placed inside us to burst forth in all its loving glory. And if we can become the mere—and also *miraculous*—vines that allow God's ἀγάπη to reach its ripest, juiciest, most abundant potential, then the fruit we produce will feed the world until it groans in fullness ... the banquet of Heaven having descended to earth.



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