

### **John 15:9-17**

As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love. If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love. I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete.

"This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you.

I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father. You did not choose me but I chose you. And I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last, so that the Father will give you whatever you ask him in my name. I am giving you these commands so that you may love one another.\*

## **Abiding in Love** - May 9, 2021

*John 15:9-17*

Is there any image more reflective of the nature of love than that of a mother holding her baby? Really, how can it not be? A mother and child together has to represent the ultimate example of unconditional love in action. Babies are utterly helpless. Unlike most offspring of animals, human babies are totally helpless. For not just days, but weeks, months, even years, babies are incapable of fending for themselves. As babies, there is no way we can gather food on our own. We can't even move, let alone walk! When we are born, we have no idea how our arms and legs work. We need care, intense, personal care, every single day. What am I saying! Every single day? How about every single hour, even sometimes every single minute!

Furthermore, we know that there is more, much more, to caring for babies than just feeding and changing them. Holding, cuddling, talking, having eye contact is absolutely essential for the development of babies. Babies exist in a state of absolute dependance, total reliant on their mothers and other caregivers. No question that many mothers and caregivers do receive a profound sense of satisfaction and joy in caring for their babies.

But we also have to admit that there are some mothers who were not good caregivers for their children, neither as babies nor teenagers. Such may indeed your own experience with your mother or caregiver and if that is case, I am profoundly sorry. Occasions like Mother's Day and Father's Day are always sad for some of us and to pretend otherwise is just a lie.

Nonetheless, a mother's love for her baby, while never perfect, is the closest analogy we have for the endless, unconditional love of God that Jesus Christ shows for us. There is nothing, nothing, most mothers would not do for their babies. We have heard the stories of women and men who have made tremendous sacrifices, up to and including their very lives, so that their children may live or have opportunities that they didn't have. The task of being a parent is the hardest thing we may ever do. I'm not saying this to imply that some parents are better than others or make anyone feel guilty. The mere fact that we are here, together, obviously means somebody or a group of somebodies insured that we were fed, clothed, housed, educated so we could gather together this day. And when you think of it, that is an enormous achievement in and of itself.

But today's scripture takes the concept of love to a different level. Parents love their children naturally. I mean, for the most part, one of the primary reasons they love their children is that they, with God, co-created them. They look at the baby and can say that this person, this screaming, crying, squirming person is here in part because of me. Adoptive parents, such as Kelly and I, feel similarly: that child sitting at our table is there because we made a deliberate decision to welcome

this person into our home. In other words, our children are with us because we almost always wanted that child to be with us. The choice was ours.

But Jesus takes the concept of love and converts it. Utterly transforms it. Jesus said, “This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you.”

Listen again. Jesus says, “This is my commandment.” Commandment! Jesus is commanding us to love each other. Let’s take a moment to think about this. How can anybody take this commandment seriously? Really? I’ve met a whole lot of people in my life. I can honestly say that I don’t like all of them. And when it comes to loving them — you must be kidding.

I know that all of us know people we simply do not like for a myriad of reasons. From the bullies who made fun of us or even hit us in school to ex-wives or ex-husbands we seek to avoid or even thinking about, we all have people we don’t like. Obnoxious co-workers, loud neighbors, politicians and their supporters, people give us all kinds of reasons to dislike them, don’t they?

For a long time, as a youth and even as a young adult, when I heard the word “love” I thought of love as being a more intense version of the word like. I mean if we were loved, then I assumed it automatically meant that they liked us.

But loving and liking can be very different things, can’t they? It is very possible, even normal, to like someone without necessarily loving them. I have friends and family members, people whom I like spending time with, people whom I really like working with. When they text or phone or social message, I’m glad to take their calls. At the same time, I’m not sure I love these people. I mean I don’t love them in sense that I want to spend the rest my life with them. I don’t love them in sense that I want to share my hopes and fears and dreams with them. And would take a lot of thought and prayer for me to give them something important to me, like a kidney.

I question myself. Why do I differentiate among people? Why are there things I would do without a second’s hesitation for my wife or children, but not necessarily for anyone else? Why do I have a hierarchy of giving built into me, ranking people according to what level of help I would give them if they were in trouble. Does that mean I love some more and love others less?

Other cultures understand this dilemma a bit better than we do. They appreciate the nature of love and understand that the word love has many different meanings. The Greeks differentiated love in several forms. The city named Philadelphia being an excellent example. We all know that the name Philadelphia is translated as “The City of brotherly love (and sisterly affection).” That form of love, known as *Philia* is actually more akin to our word for like. Philadelphia love is the kind of love that leads us to care about friends, co-workers, and neighbors.

Physical love is known by the Greek word *eros*. Greek even has terms for love of family and love of self. Their way of thinking about love really helps us understand the many dimensions of our English word, love, and demonstrates why it is possible to like someone without being in love with them as well as loving someone whom we do not necessarily like.

Jesus, when he speaks of love, is obviously not referring to physical love. Nor is he telling us to love others the way we would love ourselves or even our families. He is not even telling us to be friends with each other. Jesus certainly was not friends with the Pharisees and other religious leaders who were constantly arguing with him. It is also clear that even among his own disciples, Jesus preferred to be with some more than others. In his gospel, John even called himself, “the disciple who Jesus loved” so close was their friendship.

But today’s scripture is not speaking of any of those forms of love, because all of them refer to our having some kind of intellectual or emotional awareness of another person. We cannot like a person if we have not met them. If I say something such as, “I really like Ryan Howard.” Well, no, I don’t like Ryan Howard. I’ve never met him. Never spent any time with him. All I really know about Ryan Howard is that he that he played for the Phillies for 12 years and compiled quite a record with them. When I say I like Ryan Howard, what I’m really saying is that I respect his abilities as a baseball player. He’s really good. He also happens to be an investor in a really good chicken restaurant near my home, and I like that, too.

However, in the way Jesus uses the word, I can say that I love Ryan Howard. Yes, I love Ryan Howard. Not as a baseball player, not as a restaurant investor, not even as a father or resident of Burlington County.

Jesus commands me to love Ryan Howard because Ryan Howard is first and foremost a child of God just like me. Ryan Howard was created in God’s image just like me. He is a human being just like me. And he shares this earth, breathes its air, drinks its water, participates in the wider company of others, just like me.

For that reason, for that mere fact that Ryan Howard and I are part of God’s creation, Jesus commands me to love Ryan Howard, and so I will.

Christian love as commanded by Jesus goes by yet another Greek word for love and that word is *Agape*.

*Agape* love is a form of love that is completely different from all other forms of love because *Agape* love does not require us to know others personally or have any kind of relationship with them. In fact *Agape* love for each other exists even when those we are commanded to love hate us or are hurting us. Jesus showed *Agape* love for those who were crucifying him when he asked God to

forgive them. The only relationship Jesus had with his tormentors was one of profound separation and misunderstanding. He certainly didn't like them or what they were doing to him.

But he did love them. Jesus loved those who crucified him just as Jesus loves us who are actively worshipping him. Friends, Jesus loves those who don't worship him. Jesus loves those who deny he existed. Jesus loves those who are doing their best to wipe Christianity out of people's homes or even entire nations.

Is Jesus crazy or what?

The Agape love that Jesus commands us to have for each other does not and cannot judge based on anything. Look back at the first chapter of Genesis. God created human beings in the image of God and pronounced us to be good.

All of us, all of us, all of us are created in the image of God. That means we all have God within us. How can we hate anybody else? How can we hurt anybody else? How can we possibly deliberately work to make someone's life bad? If God is in all of us that means to hurt even one human being, either by what we have done to them or by what we have failed to do for them, means that we are hurting every human being.

I know that what I am saying is an enormous concept to understand, much less accept and attempt to put into practice in our lives. Yet if we start with the idea of how most mothers do their best and sacrifice all they can for their children — then we take the example of a mother's love and amplify it to what Jesus does for us, you can see that what Jesus is asking us to do for humanity is the ultimate conclusion of what most mothers do for their children.

How can I love someone who hates me? How can I love someone who rejects all my ideas and beliefs? Jesus commands us to do so. Every day, Jesus forgives us, forgives us for sins we don't know we've committed. And Jesus loves us unconditionally. Imagine, just imagine a world in which all of us, loved and accepted each other just for being together, sharing this world. What might life be like? Consider the alternative, in other words, consider the way the world is right now.

Do we have Agape love in our world today? Obviously not. There is massive hatred, massive violence, even massive indifference to the plight of so many of our fellow human beings. The love mothers have for their children tell us plainly that we are capable of loving each other, loving in ways that rise to what Jesus wants all of us to do for each other.

Imagine a world filled with love, Agape love. A world where we greet each other not with hatred or suspicion, but openness and acceptance. Isn't that the world we would want to live in? Isn't that the example our Mother's set for us? Let us all be mothers, not only to our children but to the world!

I say these words in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.