

LOVE LIVED OUT

the Rev. Hannah Campbell Gustafson
Outreach Coordinator

January 30, 2022

Text: 1 Corinthians 13:1–13

I've seen it on cheery picture frames and home decor . . . and weddings—almost always at weddings. Even weddings that tend toward the a-religious use it: “Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude.” For the longest time I only thought of it as being beautiful, and *it is!* But in the last five or six years I've learned to be more critical of it and of what it actually means—what Paul is actually saying.

If we look at the context of 1 Corinthians, we learn that our passage today is not talking about a marriage but about a community. Paul is writing to a new church in Corinth, a church that is struggling and divided. It is a community that is divided because of inequality, because of the privileged not sharing their affluence. Things are far from comfortable and happy.

In the previous chapter, chapter 12, Paul describes the church community as a body with many parts. Every part is different but essential and valuable. “The eye cannot say to the hand, ‘I have no need of you,’ nor again the head to the feet, ‘I have no need of you.’” All parts are needed, regardless of status. The focus is on the communal, not the individual.

Chapter 12 ends with Paul acknowledging the value of the various gifts that members of the church do have but promises “I will show you a more excellent way.” This more excellent way is the way of love.

But what, really, is this love? If we look at the Greek, the word for “love” used here is *agape*: not love in a romantic or sentimental way, not necessarily the love shared by partners in marriage, but love that is bigger than that. The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. taught that *agape* is love that creates community. *Agape* is love that makes even strangers into neighbors and draws them together as one. As Dr. King defines it, *agape* “is the love of God operating in the human heart.”¹ And, importantly, it is love for *all* people.

Agape is a love that doesn't look for response. When one is living out of *agape*, they love people even when they don't like them, even when they don't admire them, even when they dislike the things they might do. They love them because God loves them. *Agape* doesn't distinguish between worthy and unworthy. It brings to mind Jesus saying that we are to love our enemies.²

Two weeks ago yesterday, an armed British man named Malik Faisal Akram took a rabbi and three congregants hostage at a synagogue in Texas. An eleven-hour standoff ensued. Initial reports had very few details, understandably. One hostage was released earlier in the ordeal. The other three got away

¹James Washington, ed., *A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings and Speeches of Martin Luther King Jr.* (New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 1986), 19.

²Ibid., 46–47.

because Rabbi Charlie Cytron-Walker seized an opportunity and threw a chair, and the three ran to safety without even a shot fired.

The rabbi and the congregation had been trained over and over again on how to deal with an active shooter situation. Rabbi Cytron-Walker reports that he was watching and listening, and he knew that their situation wasn't good. He and the others were absolutely terrified and had been strategizing about getting free. So when he saw an opportunity, after eleven long hours, he checked quickly with the two still with him, and he threw the chair. He had been trained, and he followed his training.³

Much was made of the active shooter training, but in an interview a few days later, Rabbi Nancy Kasten suggests that there was more to the story. She acknowledged the importance of the trainings Cytron-Walker had received to deal with a terrorist situation like this one. Then she said, "At the same time, Rabbi Cytron-Walker has spent many, many, many *more* hours training himself to understand other people, to be compassionate with people that he doesn't know very well and who may be foreign to him. And that's what I think led him to invite this man in, in the beginning, and to give him tea and to be concerned about him."⁴

Agape is love that creates community. Rabbi Kasten points out in the interview that there are many sources of trauma and strife in Texas. One in five children is food insecure. They have the highest rate of people who are medically uninsured. Last year saw a dramatic freeze and power outages due to inadequate work on the power grid, and that hasn't been addressed. There are myriad concerns on people's minds. And people in Texas have had to work on getting to know one another and supporting one another through various crises—they are practicing mutual aid. This practice of reliance on one another was part of Rabbi Cytron-Walker's preparation and training as well.⁵ And it was perhaps even more important, because reliance on community is the real way not only to survival but also to human flourishing. Inspired by the words of Paul, we could say that for Rabbi Cytron-Walker the philosophy that was guiding him was, "For if I take active shooter training, but do not have love, I am no safer than I was before."

We could say that Rabbi Cytron-Walker had been trained in *agape*. He saw a man outside his synagogue whom he didn't know and who looked like he needed help, and he invited him in and offered him tea. *Agape* sees everyone as a neighbor, regardless of whether we like someone. As Dr. King said, "Like is sentimental, and it is pretty difficult to like someone bombing your home; it is pretty difficult to like somebody threatening your children; it is difficult to like congressmen who spend all of their time trying to defeat civil rights."⁶ We don't have to like them but we are called to love them. *Agape* is this kind of love that extends itself, that reaches out in an inclusive, all-embracing way. *Agape* builds community across difference.

The community that Rabbis Kasten and Cytron-Walker and others have long been building showed up during that hostage situation a few weeks ago in Texas—a community of support that is not only Jewish but Muslim as well. At least one imam came to the synagogue to see if he could help in any way, and other

³"Texas Rabbi: Despite False Media Narratives, Synagogue Attack Brought Jewish & Muslim Communities Together," *Democracy Now!* January 18, 2022, https://www.democracynow.org/2022/1/18/texas_jewish_community_hostage_synagogue (accessed February 18, 2022).

⁴Ibid.

⁵Ibid.

⁶Washington, *A Testament of Hope*, 47.

members of the Muslim community brought food to Rabbi Cytron-Walker's wife while she was waiting, and on and on.⁷

In such a community there is an understanding that this latest incident of anti-Semitic violence is not unrelated to the violence and hatred directed also at Muslims, people of Asian descent, and others in Texas and elsewhere. This incident is part of a bigger pattern. Dr. King understood *agape* love in a similar way, "a recognition of the fact that all life is interrelated."⁸ Paul called the Corinthian church to remember their membership in a body greater than themselves. Our well-being is bound to the well-being of one another. This is the South African principle of Ubuntu: "I am because we are." Not because I like you, and not because you have been kind to me or favored me in any way necessarily, but because we are one. Vietnamese Zen Master Thich Nhat Hanh, who died on January 22, created the word "interbeing" to point to the same fact.

That interdependence, and a sense of our membership in a body greater than ourselves is something I'm seeing brought to the fore in the work that Nina Jonson and four congregants and I are doing with the Riverside Innovation Hub of Augsburg University. We're six months into a two-year project with other congregations in the Twin Cities exploring what it could look like to live into the *public church* model. Being a public church is about many things, including discernment about our role in the pursuit of the common good. Or, we are trying to be open to what God's call is for us in relationship with our neighbors and neighborhood. We've been learning the skills of accompaniment thus far, which to me brings about a true sense of interconnectedness. Accompanying others involves looking at and engaging with the world together, from the same level, and holding one another as valued and loved, even if we don't like one another. We are part of one body, and accompaniment helps us remember that. This is another way to practice *agape*.

Agape is not the easy choice, and it is not safe. It is love that will always take commitment and work and striving. And it is the love that Paul is telling the Corinthians to embrace and the love that we are called to embrace, too. It is the love that continues to let some neighbors sleep on the lawn, even though they may use the corner as a toilet or may not be polite or kind in return. It is the love that invites a stranger in for tea, even when we are afraid.

May it be so. Amen.

Other resource:

Elena Vassallo, "Nice Text: 1 Corinthians 13," *Christiancentury.org*, June 17, 1998, <https://www.christiancentury.org/article/sundays-coming-premium/nice-text-1-corinthians-13> (accessed February 18, 2022).

⁷"Texas Rabbi," *Democracy Now!*

⁸Washington, *A Testament of Hope*, 20.