



**SAINT JAMES'**  
EPISCOPAL CHURCH  
Fremont, California

## SERMON

17. May, 2009. Easter 6

Title: Love: 'Self-Giving and Reaching Out'

Text: John 15:9-17

J.J.



If I were to ask—which is the “Great Love Chapter” in Scripture?—most of us would probably identify I Corinthians 13, where St. Paul writes: “If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal . . . and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing” . . . (and then it goes on) . . . “Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude” . . . and so forth. Today’s Gospel reading, however, St. John 15:9-17, as well as today’s and last Sunday’s Epistle readings from the first letter of John, talk more about love than any other place in Scripture. In the old Church calendar, this Sunday used to be called “Rogate Sunday”—now I’m really dating myself. Today we simply call it the Sixth Sunday of Easter. What we probably should really call it is “Love Sunday.” The word “love” appears 9 times in today’s Gospel, 5 times in the Epistle and 3 times in the Prayer of the Day. Last Sunday’s Epistle—1 John 4:7-21—used the “love”

word 26 times (in only 15 verses), and that wasn’t because it was Mother’s Day. So, in these Sunday’s of Easter, the focus really is on love: “Love is from God” . . . “We love because God first loved us” . . . “As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you” . . . “Abide in my love” . . . and . . . as we prayed in today’s Collect: “Pour into our hearts such love.”

This past Tuesday, I got up at 4:30am, and made my way to the Tuesday 6am Bible Study. You should try it some time (or better yet, start one on your own). At that Bible Study, we looked at today’s readings and got some background regarding the street language of that day—*koine* Greek—the language in which the Christian Scriptures were written. In sharing with one another, we discovered that there is not just one word for “love,” as in the English language, but four different words in the Greek language to describe what we call “love.” One of these words is *storgê* which has to do with family affection, kinship, as in the love of a parent to a child, and vice versa . . . another is the word *philia* which denotes a special friendship or bonding, as in “Philadelphia,” the city of brotherly love . . . and then there’s the word *eros* which has to do with that wonderful creative love between spouses or couples, that “special” attraction; and finally, there’s the word *agapê* which refers to a self-giving kind of love, a reaching out to others that expects nothing in return, a selfless, sacrificial love in which one asks for and expects nothing from the recipient. Now it’s this kind of love—the *agapê* love—that is used in all of the readings this Sunday and last Sunday. Unfortunately, over the years we have tried to put “values” on these four loves, thinking that the self-giving, reaching out *agapê* love is somehow a superior way of loving, and, in a way that is suggested by C.S. Lewis in his book on “*The Four Loves*,” but the Greeks didn’t think that way. They didn’t rank these “loves” as good, better and best, but simply as different.

Now, it’s interesting that in today’s Gospel, John uses the word *agapê* love, the kind of love that is self-giving and reaching out, he uses that word every time the word appears. That’s true also in the Epistle reading. Now, as I looked at these words in preparing this homily, I tried to discern what John might be saying to us, here at St. James’ and especially to us during this time of transition as we prepare to call a new Rector. And I think he’s got a lot to tell us. Listen again to what Jesus is saying: “As the Father has in a ‘self-giving, sacrificial way reached out’ to me, so I have, in a ‘self-giving, sacrificial way reached out’ to you; abide in my ‘self-giving, sacrificial way of reaching out’ . . . “I am giving you these commands so that you may in a ‘self-giving, sacrificial way reach out’ to one another.” That, dear people, is key to our being Christian—loving one another in a ‘self-giving, sacrificial way of reaching out’ to others—and that is key for our life together here at St. James’ as we prepare to call a new Rector.

As you know, we have before us these days the monumental task of preparing our community and parish profile, and I must say, our Transition Team is hard at work beginning that process. They are peering through all of the comments we made when Dr. Michal Anne Pepper was here in February to help us explore our “life cycle” as a congregation . . . they are reading carefully those things which we “Let Go” during our Lenten Tuesday night soup suppers, those things we lay at the foot of the cross on Good Friday and those things we used to light the new light of Christ at our Easter Vigil . . . they are pouring through all of our responses to the four-page questionnaire we each got from the U.S. Congregational Life Survey last month . . . and they are planning a second round with Michal Anne for us all on June 21<sup>st</sup> as we explore how we will continue to grow this congregation. Let me tell you they are hard at work; we have given them a lot to do.

But, we’ve got our own work cut out for us, too, in the days ahead. Preparing the Parish Profile is not just the task of the Transition Team; it’s our work. And one of the primary tasks we have is to once again identify our “Vision” as a congregation and our “Mission.” Now, I know what your thinking: didn’t we just do that 3 years ago. Yes . . . but it’s time to do it again (as one of you pointed out at our Townhall meeting, “we simply made a prayer out of our Vision Statement, framed it [hold it up], hung it on the wall . . . and never really used it in our ministry together.” So . . . during this transition time, it will be important for us not just to “dust it off” to see if it works, but to engage in the hard task of looking again at our “Vision” i.e. “who we are” as the People of God in this place, “how we see ourselves” and “what we want to be” . . . AND to develop our “Mission” statement, i.e. to develop a Mission strategy of how we are going to do what God is calling us to do, here and now.

And that’s where today’s Gospel comes in. Listen to it again . . . and discern what Jesus is saying to you: “As the Father has in a *‘self-giving, sacrificial way reached out’* to me, so I have in a *‘self-giving, sacrificial way reached out’* to you; abide in my *‘self-giving, sacrificial way of reaching out’*.” . . . And, “I am giving you these commands so that you may in a *‘self-giving, sacrificial way reach out’* to one another.” Indeed, let us pray: “Pour into our hearts such love.” Amen.

S.D.G.

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