

## LOVE AND STEWARDSHIP IN THE CHURCH

Sermon preached by the Rev. Dr. Titus Presler in Grace Church,  
White Plains, New York, on Commitment Sunday, 26 October 2008  
Year A RCL, Proper 25: Matthew 22.34-46; Deuteronomy 34.1-12; 1 Thess. 2.1-8

**Full community with God,  
full community with one another  
– this is the call of today's gospel on this Commitment Sunday in Grace  
Church:**

*"You shall love the Lord your God . . .  
and you shall love your neighbor."*

Jesus put these two commands together,  
and so made it clear that the two loves, these two kinds of community,  
are bound up with each other and cannot be separated:

*There is no true love of God without love of neighbor,  
and true love of neighbor is the fruit of a loving relationship with God.*

In asking which was the greatest commandment,  
the lawyer was testing Jesus,  
but the question was not an idle one.

The law of the Israel contained more than six hundred commands,  
and the rabbis of the first century argued about which was the most important.

Jesus responded as a faithful and thoughtful Jew.

He offered the great commandment from Deuteronomy:

*"You shall love the Lord your God  
with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind."*

Called the *Shema*,

this is the commandment the Hebrews were asked to teach their children  
and wear in little cannisters on their wrists and foreheads  
and inscribe on the doorposts of their houses.

Then Jesus went beyond the question to offer a second commandment that he said was  
like the first in importance and scope:

*"You shall love your neighbor as yourself."*

This also comes from the Hebrew scriptures, from the book of Leviticus.

So the commandments were not new.

What was new was Jesus' teaching that the two belonged together:

love for God and love for the neighbor.

### **But what is love?**

There are so different experiences of love:

love between parents and children,  
love among family members, in-laws and relatives,  
love among friends, love between lovers,  
love of country and love of other countries and cultures,  
love of work, love of music, literature and the arts.

These might seem to be not only different kinds of experiences,

but even different kinds of love.

**C. S. Lewis, the British lay theologian, talked about four different loves in ancient Greek thought:**\*

*Affection*, or *storge* in Greek, is the familiar affection among people who are together by chance,

say at work or in the neighborhood.

That generalized affection reminds me of my jury duty down in Manhattan last year:

Like everyone else I went down to Superior Court groaning about how I didn't have time for this,

but secretly I was hoping I'd get assigned to a case – and I was!

There were six of us on the jury, plus two alternates, and we eight went through four days together:

thrown together by chance we developed a certain mutual affection – my memory of them is hazy now, but there it was – affection!

Then Lewis highlights *philia*, which is *friendship*,

the strong bond that develops between people who share a common interest or activity.

My strongest friendships growing up were with the guys I went hiking in the mountains with, and my closest friends now are other clergy.

But, of course, friendship cannot be formed *only* on the shared interest or activity –

my impression is that Charles Barkley and Michael Jordan certainly shared a commitment to basketball, but they were not friends,

and I don't necessarily like *all* other clergy!

Friends do *like* each other: there's a mutual attraction that makes the relationship work.

Then there is *eros*, the **romantic love** that inspires deep devotion and intimate sharing, including sexuality.

*Eros* appreciates the beloved deeply for what the beloved is in him or herself.

*Eros* also needs mutual relationship with the beloved in order to feel whole and complete.

*Eros* is the electrified third rail in human relationships –

the culmination of a deep longing,

the source of both the greatest exultation and the deepest heartache,

the energy for creativity in families and also the goad for much family violence.

Finally, there is *agape*, the love that Jesus is talking about in the Two Great Commandments,

the **unconditional love** toward neighbor that does not depend on lovable qualities,

the love that expresses care regardless of the circumstances,

and regardless of whether the object of love is likable.

*Agape* love is the mutual commitment that binds us into one human community on a global scale –

it is *agape* that prompts people to contribute to famine relief and to take in foster children.

*Agape* love is what builds community in a city, a school, or a neighborhood –

several times this fall there were walks in White Plains for various causes on  
 Sunday mornings, like juvenile diabetes –  
 that's an expression of *agape* love.

*Agape* love is what builds community in the church,  
 whether in Grace Church on this Commitment Sunday, or the Diocese of New  
 York, or the Episcopal Church, or the Anglican Communion.

This is the love in which Jesus encourages us:

"You shall love the Lord your God, and  
 you shall love your neighbor."

So affection, friendship, romance and *agape* love.

All the kinds of love share one thing in common that makes them more like each other  
 than different from each other, and it is this:

**For a feeling or a commitment to qualify as a love  
 we need to be prepared to sacrifice something of ourselves,  
 not for ourselves alone, but for the sake of the beloved.**

The *agape* love we hear about from Jesus  
 is that love in which the lover goes beyond oneself,  
 not for one's own sake, but for the sake of the beloved.

All the other loves must have *something* of this to qualify as love at all:  
 simply wanting someone is not loving that thing or person – that's just grasping.

No, love is something that happens in the space between –  
 a giving, a doing, an acting, a working,  
 a going beyond oneself for the sake of the beloved,  
 as well as receiving something one desires from the beloved.

Giving as well as receiving is what distinguishes friendship from association,  
 giving as well as receiving is what distinguishes intimacy from lust,  
 giving as well as receiving is what distinguishes family from sheer co-  
 dependency.

**This is all very well, but where does such love come from?**

**We may cry, Love!, but there may be no love,  
 or there may be only a little love, or some kind of distorted love.**

In response to Jesus command, Love God and love neighbor,  
 one might feel like Oliver in the musical as he sang, "Where is love?"

Not love but a deficit of love is what we may see when we look not only at the world  
 about us  
 but inside ourselves.

And, indeed, many have experienced terrible deficits in being loved:  
 a deficit of love from parents, brothers and sisters,  
 a deficit of love in relationships that were supposed to be intimate,  
 a deficit of love from friends, neighborhood and community.

A deficit in love received makes for a deficit in love given:  
 the unloved child grows up closed and bitter,  
 the abused wife wonders whether intimacy will ever be safe,  
 the neglected neighborhood turns into a crime-ridden neighborhood,

and so on.

So we may want to answer Jesus with the question:

"You say, Love, but how can love come out of such lovelessness;  
when there is a love deficit, where is the love to come from."

**It comes from God in Christ.**

*Agape* love, the love that serves the other rather than the self,  
it isn't just a nice idea or an abstract principle:  
*it is the very heart of God.*

God has shown us that love in going beyond God and coming to us in Christ:  
in Christ God has reached out to us to touch and embrace us,  
in Christ God has suffered for us and laid down the very life of God for us.

We are deeply and overwhelmingly loved by God.

The love deficits we might have experienced can keep us from believing that:  
it's well documented that children's experience of their parents deeply influences  
their impression of what God is like.

**The Good News is that that love deficits do not have the last word,  
we can be healed from love deficits.**

It can happen in prayer, as we sit quietly with God and let the Holy Spirit assure us that  
God loves us.

It can happen in the encounter with scripture, as we let God's words of love drench our  
being.

It can happen in the glory and tenderness of Sunday worship here in Grace Church as we  
pray the prayers and sing the hymns of God's love for us.

It can happen in reaching out in love toward others and so expressing the love of God that  
we ourselves gradually come to feel and believe.

**On this Commitment Sunday at Grace,**

people are making commitments of time, talent and treasure to the work of this  
community for the coming year.

How do you *feel* about church?

My guess is that there is more than a little love in your feelings about church,  
and especially in your feelings about Grace Church in particular.

What kind of love?

Probably a lot of affection for people you don't know so very well but nevertheless like,  
and a lot of affection for the sanctuary, the Prayerbook, the beautiful  
appointments all around us, and the music.

Probably you have some friends here at Grace,  
people with whom you share an interest and who you'd really miss if they moved  
away.

And through all and in all my guess is that you are overflowing with *agape* love –  
for God, for the people here, and for the people this parish serves.

In that love you are willing to give, to give up, to sacrifice,  
and this in the midst of the severest financial crisis since the Great Depression.

Your pledges for the coming year are expressions of love –

you're expressing gratitude for the love you have experienced in God,  
you're expressing love for the people of this community,  
you're expressing love for the world that this parish can and does touch in so  
many ways every day week and every month of every year.  
In your commitment you are responding to the good news of God in Jesus Christ,  
the Jesus who said then and who says to us now,  
*"You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and  
with all your mind, and  
You shall love your neighbor as yourself."*

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\* C. S. Lewis, *The Four Loves* (New York: Harvest Books, 1960).