

A More Excellent Love

Love never fails. The Apostle Paul wrote this in his First Letter to the Corinthians. Paul crafted some of the most beautiful language found anywhere on love, saying:

“Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never fails.”

The only problem with these beautiful words is that through our life experiences of love that often fails, they don't ring true.

A quick look at the Greek text of this passage shows that Paul writes using the word “*Agape*.” *Agape* is a “self-giving love” routinely shown to be the love God has for us. It is this *agape* which bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all thing. It is this self-giving *agape* love of God that never fails.

Paul calls *agape* love a “still more excellent way.” To set love in an extreme example, Paul writes that if he understands all mysteries and has faith so as to move mountains, but has not love, he is nothing. If he were to give away everything he owns and hands over even his very life, but has not *agape* love then he is nothing.

So what is the difference between this godly love that never fails and the kind of human love that fails everyday? The difference is that love that starts with you or me and goes out to another person is usually conditional. We love others as we think they are, or we love someone for how they make us feel, or we might even try to change them into someone we think we could love more—with just a little tweak! Or we speak the love of God with our lips, but fail to show forth this love in our communal life.

All of these are examples of love that start with us. Yet, if someone we love changes or disappoints us, or actions do not follow words, this feeling of love will likely go away. Paul tells us of a still more excellent way. We can infuse our lives with *agape*, the love that is God's love for us.^[1]

Agape love starts with God, and God's love for us. With this love of God and God's love for us, we can then begin to see other people as God sees them.

^[1] Fran Logue

From this experience, we reach out in love to others with the love that begins in the very life and nature of God.

The love that is within the Trinity is not merely a feeling or emotion. And so, God's love for all of us is not dependent on our likes and dislikes, our job, our mood, political party, or anything else so changeable.

The love of God that was in the Trinity before creation overflowed into this world of ours and that love continues even though we are fallen and not always deserving of it. This love that was in the very life of God before creation is the love that never fails. This is the love Jesus had that as he died on the cross he could look out at those who killed him, as they mocked him and say, "Father, forgive them for they know not what they do."

Forgiving those who killed him was the most precarious thing that God could do. And in these words of forgiveness from the cross, we see that God's love is more concerned about on-going life and hope than death.

John wrote of this in the letter we call First John saying, "If anyone says, 'I love God,' yet hates his brother, he is a liar. For anyone who does not love his brother, whom he has seen, cannot love God, whom he has not seen" (I John 4:21). This is a tense pronouncement in our current time.

With acts of racial and social violence on the rise in recent days our call to agape love is more needful than ever. We must reach for reconciliation as a divided people and nation, but resist such acts of hatred that seek to degrade the dignity of other human beings. And amid all of this we must work to reach common ground with those with whom we so mightily disagree. A still more excellent love calls us to be wary of easy answers or quick divisions.

Agape love is an act of will, a decision, a choice. God invites us to choose this kind of love and then act on it. Our hope, on either side of this political divide, is to find the courage to not simply talk of love, but to put love into action.

Grace and Peace, Stephanie+