

**‘All You Need is Love’
by Rev. Dr. Katy Valentine
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Last week, Mary prayed that we might get to know the *agape* Jesus – and she, maybe knowingly, paved the way for the message today. *Agape* is one of the Greek words for “love.” It should come as no surprise that love is the big message of Scripture – Old Testament, New Testament, and visible in the life and ministry of Jesus Christ. Those of you who follow me on social media know that *agape* is a theme of mine – my harp persona is *agape* Harp and the theme of my ordination here several months ago was “Celebrating God’s Unconditional Love” – a reference to *agape* love.

The reason we are talking about *agape* love today is that it appears in none other than Galatians 5:22-23, where Paul lists the fruit of the Spirit. This is the Bible verse that was the center of our Vacation Bible School and each week over the summer we have taken one fruit and explored it. For the final time this summer, hear these words from Galatians: “The Fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. There is no law against such things.” And as a reminder, the fruit of the Spirit can be cultivated by everyone – that means you and me.

So let me recap the eight fruit of the Spirit that we have talked about thus far. I invite you to take note of which ones stand out to you now. These may be in contrast to the fruit that stood out to you 9 weeks ago.

Joy: (when Rev. Georgeanne Bennett preached). This is the joy we have not that is defined by outward circumstances. We are joyful because we have the grace of God to sustain us, no matter what.

Peace: (when Rebecca Senoglu preached for us). Peace is the inner state of calm and assuredness that comes from knowing God and Jesus Christ. Inner peace leads to outer peace – when we have inner peace, we are not shaken.

Patience: (we explored when Bill Such preached for us). This patience is the kind that is long in coming, mirroring God’s own deep longing for human beings.

Kindness: (when Ellis Martin preached for us). Kindness is larger than niceness. This is the kindness that a just and merciful ruler exhibits to his or her people. Kindness is a strength that is willing to look at the needs of another human being.

Generosity: (when Laura Pierson preached for us). Generosity is not the abandonment of healthy self-awareness but instead the outpouring of the Spirit of God that we have received on behalf of others.

Faith: (when Katy Valentine preached). Faith is not the opposite of doubt, but rather welcomes doubt as part of our journey. We are faithful when we use our doubts as a starting place for exploring our questions.

Gentleness: (when Mary Kearns preached). Gentleness is strength to counteract chaos, anger and hatred. When we walk gently through the world, we discard the illusion that we control others, but we respond with the inner strength of gentleness.

Self-Control: (when Katy Valentine preached). This is the last and least talked about fruit of the Spirit. Self-control is not the chance for us to flog ourselves for our lacks. It is an opportunity to take a deep breath and to ask ourselves why certain vices hold sway over us and to ask for assistance when needed.

Jesse is just returning from his two month sabbatical. Jesse, I present to you a congregation who has cultivated, grown and produced every single fruit of the Spirit. Here they are! No, no, don't worry if you haven't achieved perfection in every single fruit of the Spirit – that's why we call this a Christian journey. For everyone, some fruit blossoms more than others. I lamented to Mary yesterday that gentleness remains out of my grasp much of the time. I confessed to all of you that jelly beans are my utter weakness in the area of self-control.

But there's one word left – the very first word that appears in the list: love. We have several words for 'love' in Greek, but it's the word *agape* that appears so many times in the New Testament: 106 times in noun form and 143 times in verbal form. This is what Paul uses in Galatians.

We have just a few of the instances of *agape* love in our Scripture selections today. Jesus says "Love your enemies." And it's not a suggestion here – it's a command. This is not a mild "Hey,

it's a good idea to maybe be loving to your enemies...": instead, it's a strong verbal command: "LOVE your enemies." And in the Gospel of John, Jesus says: "This is my COMMANDMENT, that you LOVE one another." He is not kidding around here. And, of course it's no surprise that Jesus turns first to the Hebrew Bible when he is asked what the greatest commandment of all is: Love the Lord your God with all your heart, mind and strength and second to Love your neighbor as yourself – directly out of Deuteronomy and Leviticus. All of these use some form of the word *agape*.

Lots of times we limit our discussion of love to one specific kind: romantic love. We have created a whole movie and book sub-genre called "Romantic Comedies" to celebrate romance. This is a formulaic striving towards finding the perfect romantic partner. Let's see if you can finish some of these cliché sayings about love:

How do I love thee? (Let me count the ways)
Love is (blind)
It was love at first (sight)
Love means never having to say (you're sorry)
All is fair in love and (war)

Love is the subject of songs – broken hearts and finding true love, celebrating the wild ride that romantic relationships take us on. It's The Beatles song that gives this sermon its title "All You Need is Love." They sing over and over "All You Need is Love" – and you know what? I think they're right. When we have love, the other fruit of the Spirit get taken care of and fall into line. And I can have all the self-control over the jelly beans that I mentioned a few weeks ago, but it means nothing if I don't have love.

Let me give you my technical definition of *agape* love: the unconditional and expansive and wild and no-sin-too-big, can't get away from it, kind of love. And I've got to think about all the less than graceful moments that I've had and think "thank you, God, for making this kind of love available in the universe." And you know what – God makes it available to us, and we can also share this *agape* love with the world.

As human beings we seek love out – the prevalence of songs and movies that obsess about love are proof of that. So let me ask you: How many of you find it easy to love someone who is lovable? And who returns your own love? Yes, me, too. But the Bible doesn't tell us to stop there. Jesus says in the Gospel of Matthew: "Love your enemies." Not only "love" but *agapao*. Love them with the same kind of love that God loves us. And returning to my technical definition above, the "the unconditional and expansive and wild and no-sin-too-big love of God, can't get away from love" – Jesus says we have to have *that* kind of love for our enemies.

Let's start small: let's start with someone that you don't like very much, or has done you a little harm maybe even in the past. Make it easy on yourself: don't choose a mortal enemy. Don't worry – Jesus says that you can do this! Picture that person, and practice loving them. That's it. Once we do this, we can get a little bolder. We can pick other enemies. Believe me, as a female pastor who studies the relationship between the Bible, gender and sexuality with a focus on transgender identities, I do have my fair share of people who do not like what I do. I hear from them only occasionally. And I have not really cultivated patience or gentleness all that well – so yeah, I admit, they get under my skin. Unfortunately, Jesus didn't say that they get an exception. You know what he did say? "Love them."

Notice that Jesus didn't say to *like* them. Or to let them walk all over you. Or to give in to the demands of enemies that require you to forget who you are. Jesus said to *love* them. And Paul seems to think that Jesus followers will be able to actually do this. Paul's assurance to us is that we are able to cultivate the wild, inescapable love that God has for human beings, and we can also have it for other human beings.

Of course, love is visible in our actions and our words. When I was 19, I worked at a camp all summer near Johnson City, Tennessee. The camp director told the campers each week about about her mother, who was a young bride during WWII. Her first husband died in the Pacific engagement at the hands of Japanese. Her mother found growing bitter toward the Japanese more and more. The following words come directly from Christina about her mother:

She decided she didn't want to spend the rest of her life feeling bitter towards the Japanese so she answered a call to go to bombed out Hiroshima to become a missionary. She went to Yale to learn Japanese and then she travelled by sea to be a teacher at Hiroshima Jogakuin, a Christian girls school, that had lost half of its students in the bombing. Her work involved teaching music, and that meant singing even when she didn't feel like it, even in the midst of incredible pain. These beautiful school girls who could have hated her, loved her and welcomed her and she loved them. And they taught her Japanese folk songs and she taught them Handel's Messiah. Together they had many adventures, shared laughter and tears. Most of all they shared the healing power of Christ's love. And when the time came for her to leave Japan after five years, the girls came to the train station with her, dressed in their uniforms, and as she got into her railway car, she looked out her window and those beautiful girls took out their handkerchiefs and began waving them...waving waving as the train chugged out of that station....like beautiful flowers...They kept waving those handkerchiefs until the train moved out of sight. It was as though the wilderness had burst into life.

You see, Jesus didn't command us to find the perfect romantic kiss and go for it with everything that we've got. There's nothing wrong with that, but our lives are not a romantic comedy. Jesus didn't say to write love songs and sonnets find the perfect relationship. Jesus did say to love one

another as we have been loved; to love our enemies; to love the Lord our God with all our hearts, our souls and our minds, and to love our neighbors as ourselves.

So I have to admit, it's a little cliché to preach a sermon on love – but if it's good enough for Jesus, then it is good enough for me. We have lot of opportunities to show our love for our neighbor coming up. We have the Bazaar, whose funds go to mission and scholarship; we will be starting a children's Sunday School class soon; youth can always use an extra hand; we will be tabling at an upcoming Stonewall event dedicated to suicide prevention and awareness—our presence there will let people know that they are not alone. “All you need is love” – yep, I think the Beatles may have been living the Scripture when they came up with that one. On Sept. 11, it would be easy and understandable to go different directions than love – so I am preaching this knowing that God is calling us to show our expansive, unconditional, love that comes directly from us to heaven out there to the world. God will be showing us even more ways to demonstrate the unconditional and expansive and wild and no-sin-too-big, can't get away from it, kind of *agape* that the world needs to know.

We always start together in prayer – so I welcome Pastor Jesse back to the his role as pastor of our congregation to lead prayer time for us.