

A Sermon by The Reverend Deacon Cecily Sawyer Harmon+ LCSW  
St. Thomas's Episcopal Church Newark, Delaware 19711  
Epiphany 7 February 19, 2017  
Leviticus 19:1-2.9-18, Psalm 119:33-40 1Corinthians 3:10-11, 16-23: Matthew 5:38-48

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*May the Words of my Mouth and the Meditations of my Heart be acceptable to you  
Lord Christ, My Rock and my Redeemer?*

Today the 7<sup>th</sup> Sunday of epiphany our readings are about how we treat, feel and care for one another, how do we demonstrate our love to those who are not our spouses, partners, children, close friends, or old crotchety Uncle Oscar. In the Old Testament reading we heard laws based on the Old Testament legal principle of “an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth” although this might sound a little hard, the intent of this law of retaliation was deeply humane. The law intended to prevent cycles of violence and personal vendettas.

Thank God, we do not live under the Law, but under the New Covenant enabled by the love and life of Jesus Christ. Our Lords' life and crucifixion teaches and requires us, his followers not to succumb to acts of revenge against those who treat us badly and speak to us with malice. We are to demonstrate mercy and love, literally as we heard in today's Gospel we are to turn the other cheek when we are struck, and we are to give to beggars without asking questions. Let's think about this for a moment, we are not to return violence for violence and we are to respond to weakness with grace. Do we? When see homeless people daily, what do we do? Do we turn away, do we give money, or do we take them to a restaurant and buy them a meal? When your spouse is thoughtless, or is mean do you attack? When one of your children infuriates you, do you use your greater power to humiliate them with harsh words? When that person cuts you off on the highway, do you give them the holy finger or pray for them as you allow them to pass you safely? What is this Love, what are these expressions of caring we are expected to do as children of the one God?

Love is hard to define. From the beginning of time philosophers, psychologists, poets and ordinary folk like you and I, have attempted to explain what love is and means besides the familiar saying “you know it when you feel it”.

Let's consider the types of love that exist; the ancient Greeks had four distinct kinds of love. EROS, named after the Greek god of fertility, describes a love felt particularly within the body. Eros is a state of the heart; it leads to children, family and joy. Eros is an exulted and beautifully idealistic love, but it is usually not

enough to sustain a relationship long term. PHILEO, is the love of the soul, this word should make us think of Philadelphia, the City of brotherly and sisterly love. This is a love and affection that embodies culture and beliefs; it's about the friendship you feel towards people like you, with the same interests and style. In the scriptures this kind of friendship- love is used to describe many relationships. Jesus felt this kind of love for his disciples; parents feel this kind of love towards their children and children to their parents. It is not a shallow love, but rich in emotion and feeling.

The love of community and family is called STORAGE, often dutiful, sometimes unfeeling because it is more a recognition of responsibility that we have for and to one another. But is a feeling and it is important. AGAPE defines unconditional love. It is a mature sacrificial kind of love. It is a love that will not let go. Agape puts the beloved first and sacrifices pride, self interest and possessions for the sake of the beloved. This is the love that God has for us which inspired him to sacrifice His son and His son to obey and sacrifice himself. This is the kind of love we are commended to have for one another, a love of supreme greatness.

Ostensibly, all four types of love work together but it is only Agape that is free from the error of humanity. Agape is the glue that gives us the wisdom and patience when the others fail. It is agape that teaches us to be forgiving, and to believe in doing what is good to all others regardless.

Today, we find ourselves living in very turbulent times; there is an anxious expectation of just what is next. Families and close friends are not speaking to one another; they have blocked one another on their face book page, they avoid contact and refuse to even to speak. My clients are burdened with anger, confusion and resentment. Many of them have sworn off the nightly news, questioning what is happening in our country today. In truth, we are a divided country. It is clear that we are not living in accordance to God's commandments.

Yes, there are many who have spoken up and have been active marching and demonstrating for issues which are important to them and others as allies for their brothers, sisters and fellow citizens as an expression of love. The question is, how do we do resist the mounting tides of acrimony, bitterness and hurt, while continuing to love those who are showing malice towards us?

Our brother Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. said “*I have decided to stick with love; Hate is too heavy a burden to bear.*” Hate weighs down our heart and hopes. It costs too much. Hate poisons our hearts.

As children of the living God we are to reject hate, we are to open ourselves to love, especially for those we find difficult and or who see us as “others” This is not easy and does not come without work, perseverance and patience. I would like to share a few things I have been thinking about unconditional love. Like you, God is working with me in this area.

Think of unconditional love as an action more than a feeling, to love unconditionally is to act with love under all conditions. Remember the concepts of STORAGE and AGAPE, bring those together in your mind and try to put them into action in your life. A love of responsibility grounded in a love that does not seek recompense.

Love yourself unconditionally. We must be able to recognize, accept and forgive our own imperfections in order to do the same for others. Practice self-care. If you need to take a break from the news, do it. Before you snap at your spouse, yell at your children, make an unholy gesture on the highway, take a breath. Do you need to take a walk to decompress after work? Do it. Get that cupcake instead of the bran muffin once in a while? Do it. Love you.

Make the loving choice. Unconditional love is a decision you need to make in every situation. Stop and think about the most loving way to respond. This does not mean that you are to be passive. Stay true to your principles but think about what is needed. What will preserve the dignity of the person with whom you are speaking and allow them the grace we all need to mature and grow? Do that. If you fumble, do not beat yourself up, try again next time.

Forgive. We are familiar with the phrase “hate the sin, love the sinner. What this means is one doesn’t have to like or approve of another’s action but it doesn’t interfere with your desire to hope for the best for that person. We are not who we were and by God we are not who we will become. Let us try to give others the same grace.

In this morning’s reading from *Forward Day by Day* the author wrote. “Jesus reminds us that love is what makes us children of God and family to each other.” This morning’s Gospel contains a difficult lesson to hear and even more difficult to

follow and practice. Is it easy to love someone who is difficult or shows malice or contempt towards us, our beliefs or someone we love and respect? The answer is **NO**, it is not. But through and by prayer, love, radical forgiveness, and prayer our hearts will remain open to let go of the negative energy, to breathe in the light, and love of our Lord Jesus Christ as we stand uncompromising in or pursuit of justice, peace, and love. Let us as the church founded on the hope, and love of our Lord Jesus the Christ, say *Amen*.

*Amen*