

May 28 No Greater Love Than This
John 15:13; Romans 12:1-13

It is fitting that Memorial Day and the day we remember as Ascension Day come so close together. Each is a day we remember and honor sacrificial love and sacrificial service.

On Memorial Day, we remember those who have given their lives fighting for the freedom each of us enjoys. They have demonstrated the meaning of John 15:13 “No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends.” God, through Jesus Christ, has extended sacrificial love to us. A few weeks ago, we recognized the Greek word for this kind of love: agape.

Agape love

Agape love has several characteristics that may not be consistent with other kinds of love. Agape is NOT erotic love; it is NOT love of a friend (philos). Rather, agape

- ◆ Is unconditional
The soldier who gives her life doesn’t demand that a person accept a certain list of beliefs or behave a certain way before that soldier goes into battle
- ◆ Does not require a person to change before being loved
The soldier who gives his life doesn’t ask first, “If I die in battle, do you deserve my sacrifice?”
- ◆ Is extended even to the unlovable
- ◆ May not be reciprocated – the person you love with agape love may never love you
Soldiers serving in Vietnam often came home to ridicule and rejection, only because they had been obedient and answered the call when drafted, or enlisted, and had served in an unpopular war.
Too often, we don’t even know the names of those who have died on our behalf. Since the First Gulf War, we have done a better job of publicizing names of fallen soldiers, and remembering. Even so, we don’t find ways to express appreciation, let alone love, for the one who died. 1

- ◆ Is not a warm, fuzzy feeling
Sacrificial love may even appear to be acting out of a sense of duty rather than acting out of love

Those who have served, and especially those who gave their lives, answered the call to serve something greater than themselves. Let us pause and remember in silence...beginning with World War I and ending with those still serving in locations such as Iraq, Afghanistan, Somalia. (PowerPoint listing wars in which the US has fought and showing a flower associated with each war.)

Let us not forget. We pause to remember and say, “thank you.”

As Christians, we have a very similar call...

Love/serve unconditionally

Love/serve even those who have not changed from their “sinfulness”/do not see any reason to change

Love/serve even when our love and service are not reciprocated

This is the love to which God through Jesus Christ calls us repeatedly in the New Testament. Romans 12:1-13 very clearly establishes God’s call to us. Today let’s focus on Romans 12:1-2
Present yourselves to God, a living, consecrated sacrifice – as an act of worship

This very short verse requires so much of us, if we are to be followers of Christ.

We are to present our bodies, our ordinary, everyday lives, our daily tasks to God for God to use for His glory

When we say we believe in Jesus Christ as our Savior and Lord, we are filled with God’s Holy Spirit. Our bodies are a temple of the Holy Spirit That’s what Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 6:19-20.

The Authorized Version, more familiarly known as the King James Version, phrases Romans 12:1 this way: “...present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God, which is your reasonable service.”

The Greek word which we translate “serve” or “service” initially meant to perform work for pay. Over time, the word came to mean “that to which you give your whole life.” 2

Serve, service: not just working for pay but something to which we devote every aspect of our lives.

As used in this verse of scripture, the word can mean both service to God and worship of God

Real worship is when we offer our everyday life to God

Everyday – not just on Sunday mornings,

Everyday, every task: out there beyond the wall of a church, when we get up in the morning, the decisions we make, actions we perform. Even when doing so, offering God our everyday life, requires everything we have and everything we are.

Over 30 years ago, American Baptists recognized that worship and ministry are not limited to the church on Sunday morning. Through Ministry of the Laity in the Workplace, coordinated by Susan Gillies, American Baptists were encouraged to serve God in their everyday lives. More recently Gillies and Ingrid Dvirnak co-authored “Empowering the Laity,” in which they tell the accounts of those who are serving God as they perform their secular jobs each day.

We are called to present our bodies as a living sacrifice, an act of worship. We are called to serve something greater than ourselves, Even when that means facing the possibility of death. Last week, Joe’s Sunday School class watched a video in which a Christian pastor in Turkey was arrested for being a Christian. Ask Joe to tell you that story. Just Friday more than 25 Coptic Christians in Egypt were killed in an attack on a bus in which they were riding

We also are called to serve something, someone greater than ourselves, even when that means facing the possibility of death. But please do not misunderstand what I am saying. Understand that persecution is not limited to Christians. Please study Christian history. When you do, you will discover that Christians also have persecuted others: during the time of the Crusades, approximately 1100 to 1300, during the Inquisition in Europe, in the late 1400s and more recently as extremists, in the name of Christ, persecute others. Extremists of all backgrounds use religion to justify their personal hatreds.

3

We worship God every day as we put God first in all we do: as we serve God and serve others in love.

As I attempted to visualize this idea of individual sacrifice for something greater than ourselves, I remembered a suggestion made at a pastors’ gathering a couple of weeks ago. Visualize a system of waterways: rivulets, tributaries, streams, rivers and finally the ocean.

As individuals, we are rivulets, each of us very small. We gather together and merge to form churches, much like rivulets come together into tributaries. Churches work together in groups and/or denominations, as many tributaries feed into one river. And denominations, groups of churches, come together, as rivers flow into the ocean, to be the Body of Christ on earth.

What happens when there is no water to refresh the rivulets? They dry up. What happens when the rivulets dry up and little or no water flows into the tributaries? You get where this is headed. Without life-giving water, the rivulets, tributaries, rivers diminish in strength or cease to exist.

We do not retire from life! We do not retire from living as a Christian each and every day.

Romans 12:2-3 warns us to not conform to the worldly values and practices around us. Remember the jitterbug? Powder blue leisure suits of the 1970s? “Big hair” of the 1980s? Disco dancing and platform shoes? Rather than conform to fleeting fads we are to be transformed by the renewing of our minds. As I read that verse, I recalled Paul’s exhortation in Philippians 2:5: “Let this mind be in you that was also in Christ.” Paul describes Christ as a person of humility and one who put the interests of others ahead of his own interests. Our transformation continues until our very essence, our very being is shaped in the will of God.

Romans 12:9-13 challenges us to live transformed by Jesus Christ, the source of living water.

4

Christian love, agape, must be sincere, must be about others, not ourselves. We must give up our comfort, our convenience. We may be called upon to let go of something or someone important to us.

Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit, serve the Lord. Romans 12:11

Can you imagine a company of 100 soldiers preparing for battle As they get up the morning of the battle, 25 of them say, “You know, I have some other important commitments today. I won’t be able to make it to the battle.” And they leave. The remaining 75 continue preparing, knowing this will not be an easy day. But then 50 of them hesitate. “Let someone else do it...” they say. We’ve fought in several battles already so now it’s someone else’s responsibility to fight.” They also leave. Preparation continues, but the original company of 100 is now diminished to only 25. These 25 are fully committed and ready to go, but they are being asked to fight as if there were 100 soldiers, not just 25.

The church is like this company of 100 soldiers. Other commitments crowd out our worship of God. Many have said, “Let someone else do it...”

I remember Virginia Barnhill. In her late 50s, she had felt the sting of remarks from her friends: “Let someone else teach VBS and Children’s Sunday School; you don’t have to. We’ve done our time. Now it’s time for someone else to step up.”

“Done our time” Does that phrase strike you as it does me? “Done our time” Is serving God like a prison sentence: we are obligated to serve a certain number of years and then we’re released? Not so. Paul tells us “do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit, serve the Lord.”

I’ve been talking about presenting ourselves as a sacrifice. What I’m about to say may, at first, sound like a contradiction. ALL of us, in this congregation, ALL of us as Christians are called to love sacrificially. That is ALL of us, not just some in the congregation

It is often easy to let someone else do the ministry, as I mentioned earlier with Virginia Barnhill continuing to teach even as her friends told her they no longer had to serve.

It is often easy to let someone else do the tasks required for us to function as a church:

- ◆ Counting the money each Sunday, cleaning the church each week,
 - ◆ Teaching Children’s Church
 - ◆ The church worship bulletin, the church newsletter
- Just to name a few of the many necessary tasks.

It may be easy to let someone else do it, but that isn’t what God calls us to do and be, here in Romans 12:1-13 and elsewhere in the New Testament. We all have received at least one gift/talent from God and we are to use that gift/talent as an act of worship.

When we let someone else do the ministry, too often this is what happens....(Picture of skeleton on couch. Caption reads “And then the pastor said, ‘We just need you to do this job until we find someone else.’”)

This picture is descriptive of someone who said “yes” once **and the church failed to serve along side...**

We have some in this congregation who have said “yes” when asked to serve and months, or years, later are still the only one, or one of a very few, who continue to carry the ministry they agreed to help with. Is the only way out for these people, because more have chosen not to use their gifts/talents, death or leaving this church for a different church? I hope not. Each of us, not just some, is called to serve sacrificially, to love sacrificially. And we are given the power we need.

Thursday, May 25 Day of Ascension

After his resurrection, Jesus had appeared to the disciples many times, eating with them, continuing his teaching. On the day Jesus ascended into heaven, he offered one last teaching. Acts 1:8

“You will receive the power of the Holy Spirit”– the disciples would have all the power they needed, though they would not have an earthly kingdom

What are we to do with this power? Be Christ's witnesses, beginning in Jerusalem and going to all nations
"You are my witnesses; I am sending you." Jesus said to the disciples. Luke 24:48-49

The Lord doesn't ask us to serve and leave us powerless. We too have access to God's Holy Spirit. The lyrics from a song I heard several years ago come to mind: "For the strength to live, to serve, is not my own. I will survive, I am alive, I stand before the crucified one. I can go on, I will be strong, for the strength to live, to serve, is not my own."

What enables us to worship God with our lives, to love and to serve with all we are and all we have? We have the Holy Spirit and we have God's love.

I want to close with a summary of the book A Wrinkle In Time – Madeleine L'Engle. It is the story of the Murry family.

Meg is a junior high student. Unsure of herself, she is at odds with everyone at school. Meg's mother and father are research scientists. Her father has been gone for four years; even as the gossips whisper, the family assumes he is involved in a government project.

Meg, her younger brother Charles Wallace and their new friend Calvin are transported to a distant world where people are neither happy nor unhappy. Every minute of every day seems to be programmed; everyone looks and acts like everyone else. On this visit, a visit to rescue their father, Charles Wallace falls under the influence of IT, the brain controlling this planet and its people. Eventually, Meg and Calvin do rescue their father, who also had been imprisoned by IT. Who will return to rescue Charles Wallace?

Guided by three spirits who tell her she has something IT doesn't have, Meg is told only she has the capacity to free her brother. No one else can return to the planet if Charles Wallace is to be rescued; only Meg. Meg struggles: What do I have that IT doesn't have? Intelligence? No. Strength? No. Power and control? Absolutely not. What does IT NOT have? Though filled with fear, Meg finally realizes the answer: Love. Meg is overwhelmed: "I have love, love for Charles Wallace! IT doesn't even understand what love is! And it is Meg's love that restores Charles Wallace and the family. 7

We have received God's love, agape ...that means

We are to present ourselves, our bodies—time, talent, gifts—as an act of worship, a sacrificial act

We serve as an act of gratitude for God's love for us, a love which we share with others

As God's children, we have received the love of Christ; we have the love of Christ. And it is this love that makes us truly different.

When we finally do retire from this life and make the transition to heaven, may this verse, Philippians 1:6, be said of you, "he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus."