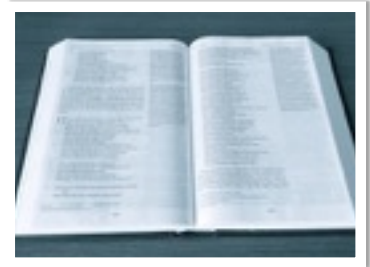


SUNDAY MESSENGER



*Love one another as I have
loved you*

Selfless Love

We are very familiar with the conversation between the risen Lord and Peter in which Jesus three times asks Peter, "Do you love me?" and Peter three times answers, "I love you" (John 21:15-17). However, the original dialog is not that simple. When asking twice this question, our Lord uses the Greek word, 'agapao', but Peter, answering, uses another word, 'phileo'. Jesus' question, "Do you love (agapao) me?", means "do you love me the way I have loved you?" However, Peter's answer, "I love (phileo) you", only means "I love you as a friend". Unfortunately, this subtle difference is often lost in translation.

A Friend In Need

The ancient Greek had four words describing love: eros, storge, philia, and agape. 'Eros' refers to intimate love, 'storge' to love between members of one household, 'philia' to love between friends, and 'agape' is understood as selfless love.

The popular saying, 'love is blind', was coined to account for the power of erotic love. The ancient Greeks called it 'madness from gods', because it makes people obsessed and oblivious to reasoning. Another familiar saying, 'blood is thicker than water', points to the strength of 'familial love'. It is visible in relationship between parents

As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Abide in my love. If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love. These things I have spoken to you, that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full. This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you. No longer do I call you servants, for the servant does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends, for all that I have heard from my Father I have made known to you. You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit and that your fruit should abide, so that whatever you ask the Father in my name, he may give it to you. These things I command you, so that you will love one another. (John 15:9-17)

and children. It embraces honor, respect, and devotion to the members of own family. However, none of these two words made it to the New Testament.

Love as friendship is present in the Gospels and the writings of the Apostles. Jesus is called the friend of tax-collectors and sinners (Matt 11:39). He calls, Lazarus, 'our friend' (John 11:11) and tells us that we are also His friends if we do what He commands us (John 15:14). We can be either the friends of God or friends of the world. For his faith Abraham was called "the friend of God" (James 2:23), but quarrels, fights, desires and passions bind us to friendship with the world. This two relationships oppose each other: "whoever wishes to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God" (James 4:5). Are you a friend of God or of the world?

Being asked about the quality of his love, Peter assures the Lord of his friendship. There are friends for sunny and rainy days. There are friends who share our victories but abandon us in time of crisis and those who stick with us in need. Peter was the former not the latter. He enjoyed basking in being the first among the Twelve, but ran away from the Cross. What kind of friend are you? Like Peter (John 18:25-26) or like the disciple whom Jesus loved (John 19:26)?

No Greater Love

As far as love is concerned, agape is the key word in the Bible. Paul uses it in his magnificent hymn about love. "If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. If I give away all I have, and if I deliver up my body to be burned, but have not love, I gain nothing" (1 Cor 13:1-3). It is used when declaring that "God is love (agape)" (1 John 4:8). Thus, we can say that God is Charity and Selfless Love. Jesus says that "greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends" (John 15:13). The Cross explains the meaning of selfless love. "In this is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins" (1 John 4:10). Thus, when we hear that God is love, it means that He is selfless love or charity.

This selfless love was not yet in Peter's vocabulary. Noticing it, our Lord lowered the standards for the first among the Twelve. The third question is: "Do you love (phileo) me" (John 21:17)? Christ did not ask anymore for selfless love. Apostle's friendship should suffice as a starting point for the renewal of their relationship. Someone said that Christianity promises four things: tribulation, temptation, persecution, and everlasting life. Like Peter, we are not ready for that yet. We love to sing, 'What a friend we have in Jesus', but we are not ready to sacrifice our lives for Him and the Gospel. When God calls us to this kind of love we angrily complain: 'How can you do this to me, Lord?'

The last words spoken to Peter by Christ in John's Gospel were: "follow me" (John 21:22). By obeying this commandment, Peter finally learned the meaning of Christian love. It gave him courage to preach the Gospel. It set him free from ethnic prejudice. "Truly I understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him" (Acts 10:35). It taught him how to shepherd Jesus' flock, willingly, not for shameful gain, not domineering, but being examples to the flock (see 1 Peter 5:2-3). Finally, it freed him from that paralysing fear of death that forced him to deny his Master three times. The fourth time would never come. Instead, he bore the lasting fruit of martyrdom, by laying down his life for Christ and His sheep.

Conclusion

I often wear 'I love Jesus' t-shirt. Once, a colleague of mine saw it and asked: 'Does He love you too?' 'I have no doubts about it, but I doubt my love for him', was the answer. Love is the most misunderstood word in our times. It is always on our lips but it is devoid of its true Christian meaning. Like Peter and other disciples, we need to relearn it. "Love one another as I have loved you" (John 15:12) is the main homework that Jesus has left us to do. Its compilation will determine where we will spend eternity.

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