

In the name of ✠ Jesus.

We heard a lot about it in last week's epistle; and we hear of it again in this week's texts: the theme of love.

Now as you talk to young children about love, it's often received with a big: "Eeeeyeeew." There's definitely a big "ick factor" with them when it comes to love. Almost immediately the little rhyme starts playing in their heads: "*Evie and Adam sittin' in a tree, k-i-s-s-i-n-g; first comes love, then comes marriage, then comes Cain in a baby carriage.*" You might even remember your youth, taunting someone with such a jingle yourselves.

And, to be sure, this kind of love—romantic love leading to a sexual expression—is important. It's not forbidden by the Bible or by the church. It is, after all, how man and woman fulfill God's primordial directive to "*Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth.*" But we do want this good gift of love to be used in godliness—in marriage, "*not in orgies and drunkenness, not in sexual immorality and sensuality,*" not gratifying the desires of the flesh. And it's not odd connecting these things up: drunkenness and sexual immorality. The Greeks sought in this kind of love—they called it ἐρως—a kind of intoxication, and it found expression in "*the fertility rites and prostitution*" that flourished "*in the temples of the great goddesses*". As one scholar put it, "*eros is an ecstasy which transports man beyond rationality.*"

But this is not the kind of love that Jesus is talking about today. The Biblical word for love is certainly not ἐρως. It's ἀγάπη. And the difference is striking. Whereas ἐρως is marked by impulse and the absence of rationality; ἀγάπη is marked by rational choice, "*a free and decisive act*" by the subject. Whereas ἐρως is inward looking, seeking "*in others the fulfillment of its own ... hungers*"; ἀγάπη is outward looking, "*a giving, active love on the other's behalf.*" That Jesus came and changed everything is so obvious considering that before Jesus and the New Testament, ἐρως was the focus of the religious and philosopher; but it's not found in the New Testament. On the other hand, ἀγάπη "*is almost completely lacking in pre-biblical Greek.*" But we find it (and the corresponding verb) all over the New Testament, and especially in the evangelist John and his epistles.

So this biblical love that Jesus talks about in the Gospel is an action word. It does something for others. Thus when you think of this kind of love, what do you think of? On this Mother's Day, perhaps this is what you're thinking of: the love of a mother. Indeed, when we think of our mothers, isn't that what comes to mind? Their unconditional love, that loved you when you were both bad and good, that loved you through failures and successes, that loved you when you were a precious infant, that loved you when you were going through your terrible two's, that loved you when you started to push away her hugs and kisses, that loved you when you

started to rebel against her and thought you were wiser than she, that loved enough to go to the front line of a riot and pull her son off that line and wallop him up side of the head and chase him down the street to keep him safe, that loved you when you sought your independence and left home, etc.? As one author wrote: *“When you look into your mother’s eyes, you know that is the purest love you can find on this earth.”* (Mitch Albom, *For One More Day*)

We think highly of our mothers, rightly so. But that view can be skewed and used in an unbiblical way. It’s this view of a mother’s love — at least as I’ve talked to Roman Catholics — that moves them to seek consolation in the Blessed Virgin Mother of Jesus, and to run their prayers by her, that she might intercede with Jesus on their behalf.

But this is wrong-headed. As much as we Lutherans honor the Blessed Virgin and give thanks to God for her humble faith, we do not go to her or through her, that she might soften up the heart of our God—neither the Son nor the Father.

I mean, where does love truly begin? It begins with God. We heard it last week: *“God is love,”* and *“love is from God,”* and *“we love because he first loved us.”* In the Gospel again, we hear this love begins with God, with the Father: *“As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you.”*

Martin Luther gets this and expresses the Father’s outward-looking, self-choosing love so well in the hymn we just sang. *“But God had seen my wretched state Before the world’s foundation, And mindful of His mercies great, He planned for my salvation. He turned to me a father’s heart; He did not choose the easy part But gave His dearest treasure.”* Yes, the Father’s love for His fallen creation extends back long before the virgin mother was around. He expressed it before the foundation of the world in choosing to send His own Son as the Christ, to be the One who would crush the serpent’s head, who would redeem fallen mankind by His blood, who would restore the perfection of paradise to us.

This is love expressed in action: the Father said to His beloved Son, *“It’s time to have compassion”*—it’s time to put that love into action. *“Then go”*—here’s the action; here’s how God loved the world. He gave His own Son to be lifted up on a cross. *“Bring to all salvation.”* Set them free from sin and sorrow. *“Slay bitter death for them that they May live with You forever.”*

This is how the Son abided in the Father’s love: He willingly did what the Father commanded and gave Him authority to do. He laid down His life for us. No one took it from Him—He laid it down of His own accord. We see it by the loud voice by which He proclaimed, *“It is finished,”* by His own giving up of His spirit. This is Jesus’ love for us in action.

And in fact, this is a greater love than we're accustomed to seeing. We know and laud a mother's love that will sacrifice for her child. That's commendable, but also it's mostly expected. We're shocked when we hear in the news of a mother who acts in a way contrary to this expected love. We know and laud our country's heroes for their selfless heroics, risking life and limb for the sake of their buddies. They deserve our accolades and the medals they wear. But neither of these is sufficient to understand the Son's expression of love for us. It does take courage for a soldier to save his buddy in face of imminent danger—and not everyone can do it. St. Paul says it this way, *“For one will scarcely die for a righteous person—though perhaps for a good person one would dare even to die.”*

We understand risking one's life for buddies, and for our children. But what of our enemies? Would you risk your life for an enemy? What of the one who stole your identity, your good name, your life's savings? Would you risk your life for him? What of the one who hurt your child? Would you risk your life for him? What of the one who burned down your business, wrongly accused you, maimed you for life? Would you lay down your life for him?

I think we would be repulsed by the thought, but that's the kind of love our God is, and that's the kind of love He shows us. It's the kind of love that called us friends when we were still enemies. For this is who we are with our minds too often set on the things of the flesh—and that is death. *“The mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God,”* says St. Paul — enemies. Yet, *“God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.”* It's the kind of love that reconciled us to Him by the death of His own Son—while we were still enemies. It's the love that gives us salvation in His life — eternal life with Him, having chosen us in Him and having chosen to call us again friends.

For that's what this verse is all about: *“Greater love has no one than that He lay down His life for His friends.”* We love our mothers and give thanks to God for their love, but it's not about our mother's love. We honor our servicemen, and give thanks to God for their heroism, but it's not about their love of country or their commitment to their buddies. It's about the love of God for us in Christ Jesus our Lord that acts on our behalf. *“Abide in my love,”* Jesus says, that His joy may be in you.

Indeed, rejoice in His love. Rejoice that you have been born of God by water and the word. Rejoice that He has brought you to faith in Him by the Spirit, the water and the blood that bear witness to Him. Rejoice in the forgiveness of your sins, and life, and salvation. Rejoice that He has chosen you and appointed you to bear the fruit of love also to one another. Rejoice that He who has attached you to Jesus as branches to the Vine, gives you in the Word and Sacraments all that you need for your faith, and love, and hope. Rejoice and be glad in these ...

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.