

*John 15:12–17 (NRSV)*

<sup>12</sup>“This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you.  
<sup>13</sup>No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends.  
<sup>14</sup>You are my friends if you do what I command you. <sup>15</sup>I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father. <sup>16</sup>You did not choose me but I chose you. And I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last, so that the Father will give you whatever you ask him in my name. <sup>17</sup>I am giving you these commands so that you may love one another.

*Galatians 5:16–25 (NRSV)*

<sup>16</sup>Live by the Spirit, I say, and do not gratify the desires of the flesh. <sup>17</sup>For what the flesh desires is opposed to the Spirit, and what the Spirit desires is opposed to the flesh; for these are opposed to each other, to prevent you from doing what you want. <sup>18</sup>But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not subject to the law. <sup>19</sup>Now the works of the flesh are obvious: fornication, impurity, licentiousness, <sup>20</sup>idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, anger, quarrels, dissensions, factions, <sup>21</sup>envy, drunkenness, carousing, and things like these. I am warning you, as I warned you before: those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God.

<sup>22</sup>**By contrast, the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, <sup>23</sup>gentleness, and self-control.** There is no law against such things. <sup>24</sup>And those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. <sup>25</sup>If we live by the Spirit, let us also be guided by the Spirit.

*1 John 4:8 (NRSV)*

<sup>8</sup>Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love.

*Simple to say. Hard to Live. Love is a verb!*

This week, we begin a new sermon series on the fruit of the Spirit (Galatians 5:22). In his letter to the Galatians, Paul contrasts the fruit of the Spirit with the “works of the flesh” in verses 19-23. As you read this, here are a few things to keep in mind:

- The works of the flesh are an illustrative catalog, not an inclusive list.
- Likewise, with the fruit, there is no reason to think Paul is trying to compile an exhaustive list.
- The verb in verse 19 is plural: “the works of the flesh are . . . “
- When we turn to the fruit of the Spirit in verse 22, the verb is singular: “the fruit of the Spirit is . . . “

The point here is that even though there is an individualistic aspect to the fruit, as usual, Paul has in mind the community of faith. Thus, when someone walks into St. Andrew they should encounter a church family characterized by love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-

control. Such a church could not help but build up the body of Christ and be a good witness to others.

There is more to be said about this singular fruit but, for now, let's talk about love. For Christians, love can never be merely a sentiment or a feeling, it must be a verb.

*Yes, love really is a verb*

A few years ago, I came across a passage from Dr. Sarah Ruden that I decided to share with you. Ruden is not a New Testament scholar, but a classicist, having made her academic career in the translation of major Greek and Latin works from the ancient world, such as the *Aeneid*. She set out to read Paul in the context of his first-century Greco-Roman language and culture. Her observations are both original and fascinating. This excerpt from her book is a bit long, but very worthwhile.<sup>1</sup>

What is *agape* [love], then? Paul begins to answer this, with several sharp shifts in focus.

Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never ends. But as for prophecies, they will come to an end; as for tongues, they will cease; as for knowledge, it will come to an end.

Paul has been speaking in the first person, but now moves to the third. Love is something outside himself, but really more like a someone, since it does so many things and has so many human characteristics. Before, we were reading of religion, but most of the way through this present list, we find nothing that can apply directly to a relationship with God, only to relationships with other human beings— unless we can somehow imagine that God needs kindness or patience. Only at the end do more-religious words come back: rejoicing in the truth, believing, hoping. But the repeated “all things” (or “everything”) in verse 7 suggests that the goal is still to deal with the everyday world in an exemplary way. These humble virtues are what absolutely never come to an end. They outlast any worship, wisdom, or inspiration.

The break in style in the Greek at the beginning of this section is startling. I made a long search for parallels to this new style, and I ended up feeling like a pedantic moron for missing the whole point: these words are not supposed to be like anything else.

It's more or less a necessity of our language that the standard translations here contain a lot of adjectives. But the Greek is extreme in not containing a single one. Instead we have a mass of verbs, things love does and doesn't do. This is the ultimate authority for the saying “Love is a verb.”

Since the wording is so simple, I can translate this piece fairly literally without creating nonsense. I am also going to take out spaces between the

---

<sup>1</sup> Ruden, Sarah (2010-02-10). *Paul Among the People: The Apostle Reinterpreted and Reimagined in His Own Time* (Kindle Locations 2821-2836). The Crown Publishing Group. Kindle Edition.

words, punctuation, and the distinction between capital and small letters—none of these would have appeared in the original ancient manuscript. Below is an English version of what Paul’s readers saw on the page. To get a sense of what it sounded like when read aloud (a very common practice everywhere, but doubtless more common in the Christian churches, where many members were illiterate), read three times as fast as you would normally, in the typical manner of a Mediterranean language. This will produce something closer to the original machine gun of verbs:

THELOVEENDURES LONGACTSKINDLYTHELOVENOT  
ACTSJEALOUSLYNOTACTSBRUTALLYNOTBOASTSNOT  
GETSFULLOFITSELFNOTDISGRACESITSELFNOTSEEKS  
WHATISITSONNOTGETSIRRITATEDNOTRECKONSUP  
THEEVILNOTREJOICESINTHEINJUSTICEBUTREJOICES  
TOGETHERINTHETRUTHENDURESEVERYTHING  
BELIEVESEVERYTHINGHOPESEVERYTHINGENDURES  
EVERYTHINGTHELOVENEVERFALLS

So manically verb-centered is the passage that Paul takes two adjectives and creates a one-word verb from each (neither verb being attested previously in Greek); and he creates yet another verb, in Greek a one-word metaphor:

1. “[is] kind” (verb: “kinds”)
2. “[is] boastful” (verb: “boastfuls”)
3. “[is] arrogant” (verb: “inflates-like-a-bellows”)

If we take the meaning from the form, we could say that he is preaching, “You know the right ways to feel? Turn those feelings into acts and perform those acts, ceaselessly. You know the wrong ways to feel? Don’t, ever, perform the acts that spring from them.”

None of this should surprise us when we remember that “God is Love.”

*God is love*

John Wesley believed that the apostle John takes us to God’s essence with the simple statement, “God is love” (1 John 4:8). This is a statement about God that you could never really know without the incarnation, from the crib to the cross. We don’t need Jesus to know that God is great or sovereign or all-knowing or all-powerful. But we would never know that God *is* love without Jesus.

Jesus, fully human and fully divine, reveals to us that God is inherently relational, one God existing as three persons, each of whom is fully and completely God though none are all of God. The three, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, are not simply three parts of a whole. Each *is* the whole though not all of it. The truth is that we lack the words to describe what our minds cannot fully comprehend.

We proclaim that there is one God consisting of three persons who have always been, are now, and always shall be a loving community of three, the Trinity. This truth about God makes John’s statement, “God is love,” not mere sentiment, but a concrete statement of God’s being. After all, did John mean that God loves more than anyone? Or that God loves without ceasing? Or perhaps that God loves truly? All this is accurate, but it isn’t the same thing as saying that God *is* love. The simple statement “God is love,” seems almost nonsensical. Love must have an object. We love something or we love someone. How could any single person, in isolation, *be* love?

However, when we proclaim that God is unity in three persons, then the statement that God *is* love makes perfect sense. God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit have always been, are now, and always will be in loving relationship with one another. God *is* love because God is inherently relational. The loving relationships among the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit form the basis of God's very essence. The three persons of the Godhead<sup>2</sup> live in eternal community, in a loving community of three persons. Indeed, it is from God's love that we learn the true meaning of love. As John writes: "We know love by this, that he laid down his life for us – and we ought to lay down our lives for one another" (1 John 3:16). The triune God is both lover and beloved in the One.

This is where John Wesley's personal theology and, hence, our Methodist beliefs begin: "God is love." In the lyrics of Charles Wesley, John's brother: "Love divine all loves excelling, joy of heaven, to earth come down."

### *Created to love*

In the profoundly simple statement, "God is Love," there is a fundamental truth about humankind as well . . . we are created for community. The opening chapters of Genesis tell us that humans are made in God's image. We too are inherently relational; we are made to live in loving relationship with God and one another. It should surprise no one that Jesus reminded the scribe that loving God and neighbor are the two great commandments. We are created to love.

Frankly, it is a mistake to believe that the sole focus of our Christian life is to be our personal relationship with Jesus. Rather, our relationship with Jesus Christ is to be lived out in relationship with others. We are called not to isolation, but to fellowship and communion. We are called to love as God has loved us. And we must always remember that for love to be love, it must be freely given.

We baptize our children into this community of God's people and we are responsible for doing all we can to build it up. Thus, a key test for any congregation, not just St. Andrew, is whether others see community in us. Are we inviting? Are we welcoming? Are we involved in the life of St. Andrew or do we just show up for church an hour each week (or every other week!)? This gets to the very heart of the Gospel and is why our joyful proclamation of a triune, relational God is such Good News to those who feel isolated and alone. It has always been this way among us Christians, at least when we have gotten it right. One of the main reasons Christianity grew in the midst of a pagan world, was that the pagans could see in the Christians a way of living, the Jesus Way, that they wanted for themselves.

"They love one another, and from widows they do not turn away their esteem; and they deliver the orphan from him who treats him harshly. And he, who has, gives to him who has not, without boasting. And when they see a stranger, they take him in to their

---

<sup>2</sup> Yet another way to express God's unity-in-threeness. You'll find that people use many words and images in the effort to express the unity and relationality of God. Most of these efforts are helpful, but none are complete or wholly sufficient. If you think that you've got the mysteries of the Trinity all figured out, you are wrong!

homes and rejoice over him as a very brother; for they do not call them brethren after the flesh, but brethren after the spirit and in God.

-A letter to emperor Hadrian from a Christian named Aristides

## **Scott Engle's Bible Classes**

### **Monday Afternoon Class**

Current study: *Judges*

This class will continue our study of the book of Judges.

Meeting on-line at 3pm Monday on Scott's Facebook page. Search for "Scott Engle - St. Andrew UMC."

### **Tuesday Lunchtime Class**

Current study: *Acts*

This class will continue with our study of the book of Acts.

Meeting at 12:00 noon Tuesday in person in Piro Hall and on-line on Scott's Facebook ministry page. Search for "Scott Engle - St. Andrew UMC".

*About the weekday classes:*

Join us whenever you can. Each week's lesson stands on its own. This is very "drop-in." Both classes are recorded and are available each week in my podcast at [scottengle.podbean.com](http://scottengle.podbean.com). They are also available on Apple podcasts and elsewhere. Search by "Scott Engle Bible Studies".

### **Scott's Sunday Class**

This week: Continuing *The Old Testament in Seven Sentences*

Meeting on Sunday at 11:00 in Smith Worship Center and on Scott's Facebook page. Search for "Scott Engle - St. Andrew UMC."

**Videos of all three classes are posted on Scott's YouTube channel.** Search for "Scott Engle." These videos are posted as soon as possible after class.