

## "Cutting to the Chase"

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As the Father loved me, I too have loved you. Remain in my love. If you keep my commandments, you will remain in my love, just as I kept my Father's commandments and remain in his love. I have said these things to you so that my joy will be in you, and your joy will be complete. This is my commandment: Love each other just as I have loved you. No one has greater love than to give up one's life for one's friends. I don't call you servants any longer, because servants don't know what their master is doing. Instead, I call you friends, because everything I heard from my Father I have made known to you. You didn't choose me, but I chose you and appointed you so that you could go and produce fruit and so that your fruit could last. As a result, whatever you ask the father in my name, he will give you. I give you these commandments so that you can love each other." (John 15:9–17<sup>1</sup>)

Of the four gospels, John is the one that has most intrigued me - maybe because it is known as the "Gospel of Love." It is the only gospel in which we hear, repeatedly, that God loves us.

John and his brother James were both disciples, but John came to be known as the beloved disciple. He was the only disciple present at the foot of the cross and the one Jesus charged with the care for his mother. Unlike the other disciples, who met early deaths often at the hands of Rome, John lived a very long life, and scholars believe he was the only gospel writer who was an actual eyewitness to the events of Jesus's life.

At the time of his writing, Jerusalem had fallen to Rome, the temple was destroyed, and the Pharisees were desperately trying to pull together a new Judaism that completely rejected any element of Christian faith. The Christian community now consisted of second- and third-generation Christians, many of them Gentiles, and doctrinal variations were starting to erode some basic Christian tenets.

And so, in his gospel, John seeks to reinforce to his readers that Jesus was from God and of God—the Logos that was in the Beginning and there for all time. John's gospel, rather than telling a narrative like the other three, picks and chooses those episodes that prove the divine nature of Christ. And another thing unique to John is that he often shares personal discourses that occurred between Christ and his disciples.

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<sup>1</sup> *The New English Bible.*

We heard one of those discourses in today's gospel reading. Christ is sharing his last meal with his disciples, preparing them for what is to come and giving them some final advice. He begins by telling them that they are his friends, not servants, and that he loves them just as the Father loves him. He explains that their relationship must work in that same way and that they must love each other. Jesus says, "I have heeded my Father's commandments and I dwell in His love. If you heed my commandments, you will dwell in my love and bear much good fruit. I tell you this so your joy may be complete."<sup>2</sup> What greater joy can there be than knowing that God loves you and is using you for His purpose?

Basically, in these final hours, Jesus is cutting to the chase with his disciples, because he is running out of time. He narrows it down to two things that he asks his disciples to do: (1) Dwell in me, and (2) love one another. Do those two things, he says, and the rest will naturally follow. Then you will heed my commandments and you will bear much fruit—and your joy will be complete.

Of course, as Christ's current disciples, this "cut to the chase" advice is for us, too. Well, it's just two things. Seems doable, until we really think it through.

#1 – Dwell in me. Jesus means for us to "be in the same state of consciousness as me. God consciousness." Jesus is saying, "Stay connected to me. Develop some spiritual muscle. Practice an awareness of Spirit in yourself." This requires a great deal of discipline and consistent effort on our part, especially in our fast-paced world, so full of distractions. God consciousness doesn't just happen. It's something we must work at.

#2 – Love one another. We know that Jesus is not talking about loving our friends and family. That's nice, but it's not the radical love he means. We know that he is talking about universal agape love, the kind that does not come naturally to us egocentric humans.

I struggle with this a lot. There are some folks I struggle to even like, you know? Like the guy who sped past me on the road, but took the time to give me the finger. The guy who told me that he'd love an excuse to kill a black man with his AK so that there would be one fewer of them around here. The relative at Thanksgiving dinner whose ever-foul mouth makes me want to stuff it with Brussel sprouts. How do you even like people like that? I confess that I find it hard, but I do know that it's humanly possible.

I have known only three people in my lifetime who seemed genuinely at ease in loving others unconditionally—and they were all devoted Christians and so full of joy.

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<sup>2</sup> Paraphrasing John 15:8-17.

And I did have a strange experience on Palm Sunday many years ago that showed me what agape love feels like. I had been in a passion drama called *The Lazarus Plot* at church that morning, and it was a moving experience. After church I decided to stop at the mall to pick up some things for the kids' Easter baskets. Something had come over me, and when I arrived at the mall and stepped out of my car, everything outside was in vibrant, almost pulsating color. It was like everything was super energized. When I got inside the mall, it was jammed with people. I usually find that annoying, but instead I felt like everyone I passed was somehow part of me—and I loved them all so much! I was so full of joy that I could have burst, and I will never forget that experience. I think sometimes God gives us a brief glimpse into his kingdom so that we know what can be real.

As I have struggled to make myself feel this agapeic love, it recently occurred to me that the part I keep stumbling over is the feeling part. You just can't force a feeling—it's either there or it's not. So maybe agapeic love is not a feeling, but something that we do. Feelings can be flimsy and uncontrollable, but we can and do control our actions. Perhaps agapeic love is doing the loving thing, no matter what your feelings are. Like Cher always says, "Just do it!"

I tried out this idea recently with a woman in a social club that I'm in. She is an avid MAGA devotee, and she and I have had some tense conversations. Mostly I tried to avoid her, because it seemed to me that she quite enjoyed needling me. She recently lost her husband, and I sent her a card with a personal note that I thought she might find helpful. When I saw her at our next meeting, I put my arm around her and asked how she was doing. At the end of the meeting, as everyone was leaving, she came over to me, lightly kissed me on my cheek, and said goodbye. Action brought about good feelings—not the other way around.

A story told by Corrie Ten Boom illustrates this even better. Corrie authored the book *The Hiding Place*, recounting how her entire family was murdered in the concentration camps for hiding Jews in their home. Years later, at a church where she was speaking, she spied the S.S. officer who had stood guard in Ravensbrück. He approached her after the service, thanked her for her message on forgiveness, and tried to shake her hand.

Corrie's memories flooded back, and she said that she felt not the slightest spark of charity or warmth for him. She tried to smile and struggled to extend her hand, but she just couldn't do it. So, she prayed a silent prayer: "Jesus, I cannot forgive him. Give Your forgiveness." Then, she said, "As I took his hand the most incredible thing happened. From my shoulder along my arm and through my hand, a current seemed to pass from me to him, while into my heart sprang a love for this stranger that almost overwhelmed me. I discovered that it is not on our forgiveness or goodness that the world's healing hinges, but on His. When Christ tells us to love our enemies, He gives, along with the command, the love itself."<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Corrie ten Boom, *The Hiding Place* (Bloomington, MN: Chosen Books, 1971), n.p.

So, what I'm thinking is that we can't just wait until we feel like loving someone. If we wait for a feeling, we will never love the way Christ asks us to. Agape love seems to require us to ignore our ego-driven feelings and commit to the good of others—to do the loving thing, look deeper, serve, forgive. And when we find it just too hard, like Corrie Ten Boom, we should ask God to supply the love. He has enough to go around.

Jesus tried to make it simple for us. First, dwell in Him; keep in constant touch with His Spirit; and be conscious of His eternal presence. If we do that, then the second command—to love one another—will come easier. Whether we feel like it or not, we should act in the best interest of other people and forgive as God has forgiven us. Then we will be fruitful—we will live fully and in joy.

What greater joy can there be than to know that God loves us and is using us for His purpose?