

Sermon

All Saints' Episcopal Church

The Rev. Martha Sterne
22 January, 2017



Grace to you and peace in the name of Jesus Christ, our light and our salvation.

Those of you who know my husband Carroll Sterne – the original city slicker and happy, happy to be one – are not going to believe this but this summer Carroll is going to a dude ranch. Like with the cowboy boots and the chuck wagon and the cattle and the horses of which he has been on one once very briefly and is wildly allergic to. I'm going also, but I'm sort of in my briar patch with horses and cows and things so how did this almost seventy year old so much rather ride MARTA man I'm married to get into this pickle of the dude ranch? For love. Yes. What will you do for love?

You've probably already figured out that a grandchild is involved. For her tenth year Christmas gift we told her to pick anywhere in the 48 and she thought and she thought and said Dude Ranch! and here we are thrilled as we can be. Carroll's already been to his allergist and got a survival plan – because that's what you do for love. You go out from yourself to meet the other, in this case the already beloved other who's had him and me wrapped around her little finger as has her little brother since the hour they were born. What's a little asthma? He would give his life for them. For love.

The Greeks called this kind of parent and family love—*storge*, and friendship love—*philia*, and the love of passionate desire—*eros*. And these loves fill our lives – as parents and brothers and sisters and friends and lovers – so we, Carroll and you and I, yes we know about love, even sacrificial love, for someone so close that one loves so much that – well what will you do for love?

Self-sacrificing love for those we know up close and personal is holy and powerful and surely of God and can make the weak strong and the plain beautiful and the unworthy worthy and none of us would even be here if somebody up close and intimate in our lives hadn't loved us early and strong and well – but there is more. In this old broken world there has just got to be more love than what we feel and live into in the small inner circles around each of us. There is more to love and I think we come here – to this house where all – friend and stranger – all are welcome in Christ in love because we know this. There is more width and breadth and power in love than we can muster in our little selves and small circles.

And when we yearn toward that even more love what the Greeks called *agape* love—which the Franciscan Richard Rohr says is not love you have but *agape* is love you live inside. *Agape* is the Great Love - not something little of you or I cause or do or feel. *Agape* is the promise that we live and move and have your being in - Paul says this, too of course, that in Christ, in that Great Love is room for all. And at the heart of that Great Love is the mystery of the cross – where pain and love intersect and holy energy moves out in all directions. Which ain't pain free. The cross is pain-freeing.

All Saints' Episcopal Church
634 West Peachtree Street NW • Atlanta, Georgia 30308
Telephone 404-881-0835 • Facsimile 404-881-3796
www.allsaintsatlanta.org

Every month I meet with a group of seven wise, funny, cranky, and crafty priests – our leader is 80; I’m next and the others range not that far behind me. So picture the movie Grumpy Old Men. In collars. Well, grumpy old men and women in collars. Among us we’ve been fishing for people, to use Jesus’ great phrase, for a couple of hundred years. Not to catch ‘em and make them go to church but I believe that in the style of the first fisherman of Galilee, we have been given the grace to fish to catch and release.

Last week one of us got to talking about the relationship of love and pain– which can get even more complicated than getting shots for your allergies so that you can spend time with your granddaughter. So my cranky old clergy group thought about love and pain. And we remembered the terrible truth of Richard Rohr’s wonderful phrase – “pain that is not transformed is transmitted.” Does this make sense in you? Pain that is not transformed in here is transmitted out there. But pain that is transformed by love O my God– well – See the power and the glory of the Cross.

One of us said - when you think about pain and love you’ve got to think about the complexity of this question – is it more important in any given situation to stay in relationship or to stay right? That’s easier to answer with people that you already love enough to get allergy shots for – but in God’s big and broken world the staying in relationship or staying right question is huge - a cross shaped tension-filled question - is it more important to be in relationship or to be right? Dietrich Bonhoeffer teaches us that there are important exceptions but dear ones, Jesus seems to count on relationship so much more than righteousness. And if it is important to be in relationship can you do that with integrity – without liking or agreeing or understanding the other - can you stay in relationship? That’s agape love 101 and 303 and PhD and God knows we need more agape experts bad.

This I know from the inside as our friend Bill Harkins says that staying angry without making any effort to imaginatively and charitably understand where the other is coming is like drinking poison and expecting the other to die.

I believe the mystery of pain transformed by love, which is to say the mystery of the cross is not foolishness. The mystery of the cross is the victory of self-giving agape love over self-withholding. And I claim this – that out and out and out beyond our little circles, we do that here. We sing it and say it and live it in a gazillion ways – MAC for the working poor, Refugee Ministries, third largest in state, Covenant Community, 25 years, hundreds of men, thousands of family members, Threads – thousands of kids a year, looking good – and those are just are our marquee agape loves – in this house, we live for agape love – yes imperfectly but we live for love from here all the time.

So what will you do today for love? What will we do tomorrow for love? We’ve got our marching orders. You know them as well as I do. We say them every time we baptize somebody – let’s say them again right now, what will we do for love? Please stand and let me remind you of the words of your baptismal promise – I will with God’s help.

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Will you continue in the apostles' teaching and
fellowship, in the breaking of the bread, and in the
prayers?

People

I will, with God's help.

Celebrant
Will you persevere in resisting evil, and , whenever
you fall into sin, repent and return to the Lord?

People

I will, with God's help.

Celebrant
Will you proclaim by word and example the Good
News of God in Christ?

People

I will, with God's help.

Celebrant
Will you seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving
your neighbor as yourself?

People

I will, with God's help.

Celebrant
Will you strive for justice and peace among all
people, and respect the dignity of every human
being?

People

I will, with God's help.

Good. That's an Agape Deal! That's an AGAPE PROMISE. amen