

I. Advanced Organizer

- A. **First, I want to say congratulations. Congrats on surviving an anxious week.** It was an emotional roller-coaster, which I know included for some of us, (at least speaking for myself) way more times refreshing lists of vote counts and so on then I hoped to be doing this week.
1. Of course, it wasn't just the delay in results that made this week feel so anxious and suspenseful. **This anxious election week came at the culmination of an anxious 4 years.** Many of us have been holding our breath in some sense since election night 2016, anxiously wondering how long the person who was elected that night would occupy the White House, and if our democracy would survive however long that was.
  2. **This week has come towards the end of an anxious 2020.** This year started with an impeachment hearing that failed to address those questions, and then before we knew it, the world was shutting down due to COVID-19. **As the pandemic took over and has persisted, it's been a year of anxiety in regards to our health,** in regards to our economy, in regards to many of our personal finances, in regards to our relationships, to our schooling, to our jobs, to our families. And of course if this wasn't enough, **it's been the year we've grieved the losses of Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor, George Floyd and others.** A year we've seen **record numbers of protesters in the streets calling for justice for George** and police reform, and we've seen violence as white nationalists have pushed back. **It's been the year we've lost RBG** and seen a new justice added to the Supreme Court in record speed. And of course, here in California, we've survived the anxiety of **another record fire season,** where smoke kept many of us in our homes for weeks on end. **We have all been through so much.** I hope the last 24 hours has brought to many of us a bit of space to take a deep breath, to exhale a bit more freely and feel some real relief; even perhaps - joy.
- B. But **I also acknowledge that the joy we might feel is tempered.** This week has not brought the resounding repudiation of our current leadership that many hoped it would. In some ways, this was too close for comfort.
1. As a number of political analysts have named this week, what we've seen demonstrated by this election is that **Donald Trump may have lost the Presidency but Trumpism is with us still.** Though many across the country were celebrating yesterday, over 70 million people were not. Many of our fellow American citizens now distrust the results of this important election; believing more in their hero and his self-protective conspiracies than the diligent work of members in their local community who testify to the voracity of these results and the lack of evidence for anything fraudulent taking place.
  2. **We've talked a lot this year about viruses, how they work, how they function, how invisible they can be as they pass from person to person, but also how lethal.** As we're learning about COVID-19, even those who recover are left affected in long-term ways that are not clear.
  3. I believe some of what we will be discerning in the days and weeks to come is **the state of disease our nation is currently suffering from.** I think we, as a country, have been infected with some toxic, lethal ideology. No doubt a version of this illness has been with us for centuries, **but in recent years a new strain has developed and the viral infection has been spreading in powerful new ways.** Many folks don't see it; they don't recognize the symptoms, they're not interested in taking precautions to reduce the spread of the disease. And so, often it's those who are most vulnerable, those on the margins of society that suffer the most powerful affects of this dangerous pandemic.

4. Of course, the virus I'm describing does not have DNA to be sequenced so a cure can be introduced. Our pharmaceutical companies can't cure this problem. **What's the vaccine for this virus that's infected our body politic?**
- C. Today is the end of a series we've called "Remembering the Collective", about not just recalling that we are part of bigger collectives, even amidst the isolation of social distancing, but **also about restoring our connection - putting the various members in the body back into relationship with each other.**
1. That has one set of challenges when we think about it in regards to Haven. It has another when we think about it in regards to our nation. **How do we put this broken body together? Is that even possible?** Is that even something we should want to do?
  2. As we've been looking at in this series, in his first letter to the Corinthians, **the Apostle Paul was speaking to a divided community in Corinth that had within it very different people with different ways of life.** As we saw last week, he was passionate in his frustration with the ways their divisions were impacting their collective, desecrating even the practice of their sacred communal rituals like the Lord's Supper as the wealthy were drunk and overfed and the working class and poor went hungry. He spoke to them about the importance not of cutting one another off but of finding common identity as diverse members in this single collective he called the body of Christ. He reminded them in his conversation about spiritual gifts how much they had to offer one another, how much each of them possessed that could serve the common good. And as he built his argument on what it means to overcome the separating forces of division and live into being a diverse collective **he reached the climax of his argument by describing his ultimate prescription for how this community might actually embody the challenging unity he was calling them to; words our national collective might need to hear right now.**

II. (Turning to the text)

- A. The words Paul wrote in his climactic call to growing collective unity are words many of us have heard before, perhaps so often that we can't help but hear them awash in romantic sentimentality. **This passage is one of the most famous in all of scripture, commonly read at weddings as a young couple prepares to take vows and commit themselves to one another.** But this was not the setting these words were written for. They're actually intended to speak into the kind of moment we find ourselves in today.
- B. So as I read these words afresh this morning, I invite you to try to hear them in a new way. **Imagine you are part of one of those early house churches in ancient Corinth.** Imagine you are hearing this letter read in the context of one of those small communities in which folks have been literally sharing a table each week with others in the small community who have hurt them, who've betrayed their trust, who've lied to them, or spread rumors about them. You're hearing these words amongst a group where some have dismissed your opinions, belittled your gifts, and if you're honest, you've done some of those things to them too. Interpersonal relations are breaking down. Factions have formed. In Paul's letter, he has been calling out members of the community for the various ways they've contributed to the relational breakdown. And then you hear him say this:
  - C. ***"I will show you a still more excellent way.***

***13: 1 If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. 2 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 do not have love, I am nothing. 3 If I give away all my possessions, and if I hand over my***

*body so that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing.*

*4 Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant 5 or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; 6 it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. 7 It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.*

*8 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. 9 For we know only in part, and we prophesy only in part; 10 but when the complete comes, the partial will come to an end. 11 When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child; when I became an adult, I put an end to childish ways. 12 For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known. 13 And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love.” (1 Cor. 12:31b - 13:13)*

1. So what are some of the important takeaways from Paul’s instruction here? What would you have heard in the context of that early church community? What do you need to hear now? I’m gonna invite us to look at two insights from this familiar passage today.

#### **D. Agape love is the “way beyond measure”.**

1. Paul sets up this whole discourse on love with some specific terms I think we would do well to unpack. First is the word he uses for love: agape. What is the significance of this Greek word, “agape”?
2. Well, the reality is, in English we have one word generally that gets used in a lot of ways: the word “love”. But **Greek has multiple words that we translate as “love”**, and though they’re certainly connected, they’re also distinct. The downside of having only one word for “love” is that we miss the distinction, and with that, some of the strength of what’s being said. So let’s quickly look at these various versions of love.
  - (1) **Eros** - this is most easily summed up as romantic love. Love between partners, the love of intimate companionship.
  - (2) **Philia** - brotherly love, humanitarian love. This is the word that’s the origin for the name of a city many are celebrating this week: Philadelphia, the city of brotherly love.
  - (3) And then there’s the word Paul is using here: **Agape** - something beyond those. What is that love?
    - (a) Episcopal Bishop Michael Curry, made globally famous as the black preacher who spoke on love at the Royal Wedding of Megan Markle and Prince Harry has written a book on this agape love and it’s importance in the work of faith and justice. He describes agape love as **“a firm commitment to act for the well-being of someone other than yourself.”** It’s a love that is not utilitarian, it’s not about what you get out of it. It’s about extending your area of concern in practical ways.
3. The second Greek word that seems helpful to unpack here is **the word we have translated as “excellent”** - I will show you a more excellent way.
  - a) The word here is *hyperbole*, the origin of of word “hyperbole”. But this Greek word literally meant at this time “beyond measuring”, or you could say “beyond comparison”. I think this is intentional, not just a figure of speech.

4. The Corinthians **viewed the world in a very competitive way**, where measuring things against each other was a big part of how they made meaning. It's also why they were having a hard time getting along as they measure the status of different peoples gifts and abilities in their community against one another.
5. Paul is calling his audience to something that **rises above the evaluations they naturally make**. He's calling them to something more sacred, something more eternal. Paul starts his eloquent description of agape love by pointing to the various ways of being that those hearing him in Corinth would have seen as most desirable. **He's talking about how you win the social games of life: how you reach the peak of whatever activity you're engaging, in this case specifically whatever you're bringing to the community of faith.**
  - a) So this could mean **being the most supernaturally attuned**, perhaps even being able to speak angelic messages.
  - b) It could mean **being the most articulate**, full of evident wisdom (remember how Katie talked to us about the value of rhetoric and philosophical wisdom in ancient Corinth).
  - c) It could mean **having a huge gift of faith**, faith that can perhaps even perform miraculous signs and wonders like the moving of mountains.
  - d) It could be through **demonstrating the most dedication to the cause**, being willing to sacrifice everything in a demonstrable way for what you believe in, whether that means giving away all your possessions or enduring brutality in your body for your cause.
  - e) And yet Paul is saying: **all of these things you measure and value have no meaning if this way beyond measure is missing**. This measureless way brings meaning to all that you measure.
6. Hearing Paul talk of this "way beyond measure" brings to mind a character from a show that has broken into the cultural consciousness this year from Disney Plus: **The Mandalorian**. My family's been watching this show that comes from the Star Wars universe recently, as the newest season has just been launched. And in the show we meet a bounty hunter who is part of an order of mysterious warriors, the Mandalorians, who lives by a set of values that seem to set them apart from many of the rough-ians they encounter, particularly in the bounty hunter trade. This group has a code they live by, and when they make a choice based on it, they clarify their motives by simply saying: **"This is the way."**
7. So what is the way beyond measure of Agape that Paul was describing? How were the Corinthians to engage it?

**E. Agape love is not something you feel. It's something you do.**

1. All the descriptions Paul gives of agape are active. **Agape is not an emotion. It's not a sentiment. It's a set of actions.** All the language Paul is using to describe it is active - he's speaking with a series of verbs to tell the Corinthians about what Agape *does*, and what it doesn't do.
2. So if we look at the first couple of phrases, phrases that ring of sentimentality to many of us who've heard them at weddings we hear them as descriptions: Love is patient, love is kind. But that translation misses something. **Paul here using verbs not adjectives.** It should sound more like "Love demonstrates patience". "Love performs kindness". The focus is on the action. Then he contrasts those with the activities that are *not* agape love.
  - a) Agape does *not* envy or boast. It does not arrogantly brag. It does not act rudely. It does not insist on its own way. It does not easily irritate. It does not harbor resentments.

- (1) Bishop Curry has a helpful way of describing this antithesis of agape love. I'll read this passage at length, because I think he makes this point beautifully.
- (a) *You might think the opposite of love is hate. Watch out—you're falling into the trap of vague sentiment again. If love looks outward, to the good of the other, then its opposite isn't hate. Its opposite is selfishness! It's a life completely centered on the self. Dr. King referred to this as the "reverse Copernican revolution." To be selfish is to put yourself in the place of the sun, the whole universe revolving around you. Forget morality—at that point you've left reason behind. Life becomes a living lie. Because no amount of smarts, money, or accomplishments puts any one human at the center of existence. Intuitively, we all understand that nothing good ever comes out of selfishness and greed. Selfishness is the most destructive force in all the cosmos, and hate is only its symptom. Selfishness destroys families. Selfishness destroys communities. Selfishness has destroyed societies, nations, and global communities, and it will destroy the human race by laying waste to our planet. If we let it.*
- (2) **I don't think any of us have to work too hard to imagine what Paul is describing as the opposite of love.** We have all seen it in our relationships. If we're honest, on our worst days, we've seen it in ourselves. And what seems to be a personification of this anti-agape way of being has been occupying an outsized amount of space in our news headlines, our social media feeds and in our collective consciousness over the last four years. **You could say it's this anti-agape way, this way of selfishness, that is at the heart of the moral virus our nation is infected with.** Paul's words to the churches in Corinth, describing their challenges, could just as easily be describing our own.
- (3) These acts of selfishness - the boasting, the deceit, the insisting on one's own way, rejoicing in wrongdoing - these are *not* the way of agape.
- b) So Paul returns us to the activities that *are* the way. The actions that are our only hope for addressing the selfishness that ails our collectives.
- (1) **Rejoicing in the truth:** this is the way.
- (2) **Bearing all things:** this is the way.
- (a) That term in Greek is an image of sheltering, of becoming a barrier that creates safety for another under its cover. This is what it means to say we must bear all things, we are willing to put ourselves forward, put our bodies on the line if need be to cover those who need protection. This is the way.
- (3) **Believing all things:** maintaining a capacity to trust that there is genuine truth and there are moral goods in the universe worth standing up for, even amidst on onslaught of spin and deceit, fake news and alternative facts that beckon you to abandon all hope of standing on any firm ground, agape calls us to maintaining belief in the truth, saying this is the way.
- (4) **Hoping all things:** persisting with an eye towards a horizon that has yet to dawn with the belief that it some day will despite the bleakness of whatever moment we are in - this is the way.
- (5) **Enduring all things:** facing the threats real and imagined that selfishness lobs our way and yet pressing on, committed to what we are called to - this is the way.
3. Friends, there are certainly reasons to be disappointed this week. There are reasons to be discouraged. **The selfishness of capitalism, white supremacy, patriarchy, Christian nationalism - these diabolical forces have been given a lot of room to circulate** through the blood stream of our collective over the last four years and the results of this

election show that there are places throughout our country in red states and blue states alike, in cities and rural communities, in the south and in the north, where the virus has grown. The infection rates have spiked.

4. But agape requires us to look beyond the diseases that threaten our democracy. **It calls us not to cut off our infected body parts, or give up and surrender to the disease.** Instead, it asks us to look to the places where those infections have been active and persist in that work that is needed to treat the diseased and heal the collective.
  - a) **The week has been evidence not just of the presence of this disease, but also the presence of folks working tirelessly on the frontlines to combat it,** just like our medical professionals in the COVID pandemic. We've seen local election officials in large and small communities across the country bear with intense scrutiny, even threats of violence as they try to faithfully do their work. We've seen community members rally to defend them as they do shouting "count every vote".
  - b) **We've seen courageous candidacies breaking barriers as and winning elections.** Candidates like Ritchie Torres and Mondaire Jones, the two first openly gay Black men to win their seats in Congress. Candidates like Cori Bush, the first black woman elected to represent Missouri in Congress. Sarah McBride, the first trans woman to become a state Senator. And of course in **Kamala Harris we celebrate our first female vice president, a woman of color, the daughter of immigrants.**
  - c) But perhaps one of the best examples we've seen this week of that persistent commitment to our collective healing has come from Georgia. Two years ago Georgia state representative named **Stacey Abrams ran to be the governor of Georgia.** It would have been a first for Georgia to elect a black woman to its highest state office, but Abrams narrowly lost the election, due to what seemed to be clear voter suppression. **Stacey Abrams didn't let the sting of the defeat drive her from the work that called into public service in the first place. This is agape love in action.** As she says it: "I sat shiva for 10 days. Then I started plotting." Building on the long legacy of activism in Georgia as **represented by the late John Lewis,** Stacey Abrams spent the last two years organizing on the local level to push back against suppression of the vote, and the movement she was a part of ended up adding 800,000 new voters to the electorate in Georgia. These voters do not only seem to have delivered Georgia's sixteen electoral votes to a democrat for the first time in 28 years, they have managed to keep control of the senate still an open possibility, where other communities have failed. **Because John Lewis, Stacey Abrams, and many other activists in Georgia have persisted in believing all things,** enduring all things, hoping all things, their state will have the opportunity to impact our whole country as their special runoff elections decide control of the senate. **Agape love has impact beyond what we can sometimes imagine.** It is the way beyond measure.
  - d) Agape love also means we don't just thank the activists of color in Georgia for taking action that has benefited us personally. Agape love says, "we see the risks you're taking to stand up against oppressive forces. How can we help protect you? How can we stand with you against white supremacist revenge? How can we support you as you continue to work for justice in your community?"
- F. **Haven, we are a collective.** We are a collective who is working to identify as a community that is safe, diverse, and Jesus - centered. Our Jesus-centered orientation means we follow the one who came not to run for office, not to topple Caesar and take his throne, but **to stand with the marginalized who Caesar and the other selfish power holders were oppressing**

**and demonstrate agape.** His agape extended itself, it bore all things, even unto the cross. As he told his closest friends on his last night with them, “No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends.”. Agape love. This is the way.

- G. So as we end this series, I invite you to consider **what are the things you are called to bear with agape love?** Where are the places you have to lean in and help heal the viruses that plague our national collective? How might we as a community embody this agape with one another? And how might we partner with each other and with others to bring the healing we long for. May we today in our places of relief and joy, as well as concern for the future, breathe in the agape love of God for us. **And may we, held in the love, allow that same agape spirit to rise up and help us walk the way beyond measure. Amen.**

### **Questions for Reflection & Conversation**

1. If our nation is infected with a moral “virus”, what are it’s symptoms? How have you seen it manifest?
2. What examples of agape love have you seen demonstrated? How have you been impacted by this kind of love, either by enacting agape love or receiving it?
3. In what ways might you personally or Haven collectively be called to embody agape love in the coming year?